



How Does this End?

Conflict Escalation Scenarios and De-Escalation Pathways in South Asia

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Abstract:

Heightened nuclear risks in South Asia—most recently demonstrated in February 2019 with the first cross-border air strikes exchange between nuclear powers—have revived the study of conflict dynamics on the subcontinent. However, this analytical renaissance has tended to focus on crises that prompt major strategic escalation dynamics, while discounting a range of limited war and crisis scenarios that may not meet the traditional “interstate war” definition. Implicit is the assumption that these scenarios are not escalatory and that certain forms of warfare can in fact remain “limited”. While one frequently cited route across the nuclear threshold envisions Pakistani tactical nuclear use in response to an all-out Indian ground offensive (a “Cold Start” operation), several other potential pathways likewise carry this risk. Alternative seemingly controllable conflict scenarios including Line of Control artillery duels, reciprocal air strikes, fait accompli operations, and naval blockades also carry significant risk of increased intensity, risking deliberate and inadvertent escalation and potentially consideration of nuclear use. This paper articulates these escalation pathways and then evaluates a range of de-escalation trajectories and their challenges during high-intensity conflict. A clear understanding of both the actors involved in third-party crisis management and previous such efforts can inform future practice. Based on these inputs and the outlined escalation scenarios, we identify a variety of information-, incentive-, and intervention-based mechanisms and deliverables available to crisis managers seeking to terminate conflict between India and Pakistan.

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Executive Summary

India and Pakistan profess that they do not seek war, but conventional war resulting from limited clashes is a highly plausible outcome. The Indian government may be emboldened to pursue military operations both to coerce a change in Pakistani behavior through punishment and to degrade and deny terrorist infrastructure and infiltration. India is the most likely to initiate any conventional fighting, but it still possesses the capacity to surprise Pakistan. Both sides are more evenly matched than is appreciated, so military strikes conducted as one-offs can precipitate a serious conventional fight, despite a pre-conceived theory of victory or termination by either side.

Deliberate and accidental escalation make conflict expansion likely. In addition to the pursuit of escalation dominance as conflict termination, the potential for deliberate escalation is heightened by the pressures of domestic audiences, which desire a net positive infliction of greater pain on the adversary. This is particularly true in India where expectations are higher. Deliberate and inadvertent escalation are also driven by misperceptions and disagreements regarding what constitutes a commensurate action in tit-for-tat engagements. The fog and friction of war ensures inevitable accidents that can also motivate deliberate escalation. De-escalation is most likely to occur if India limits its objective to modest punishment and embarrassment of Pakistan rather than coercion, and Pakistan seeks the appearance of symmetric retaliation without matching India exactly.

All conflict scenarios, regardless of likelihood, contain plausible pathways to escalation. The frequent Line of Control (LoC) artillery duel is a tit-for-tat pressure release that has a low, but non-zero, risk of bell-shaped, local escalation due to built-in de-escalation mechanisms. The controlled, iterative, paced nature of reciprocal air strikes makes it a likely option in wartime, though misperceptions could heighten intensity as escalation occurs in a step-wise function. Indian cumulative emboldenment makes a risky fait accompli operation to seize territory in Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir (POK) a plausible prospect, and Pakistan would likely have to escalate to retaliate effectively in the current political environment around Kashmir. A naval blockade, though relatively unlikely, would have to be implemented quickly to be effective, and would create incentives for steep Pakistani escalation to prevent a strangulation campaign. A ground invasion, like Cold Start, is the most unlikely operation, but would escalate rapidly and exponentially.

The close proximity of Pakistan's central political-military-economic arteries to its borders exacerbates the escalation potential of conventional conflict. Air, ground, or even artillery operations on the LOC can easily expand the 90 kilometers to Islamabad and Rawalpindi. A naval campaign limited only to Karachi could disrupt up to 90% of Pakistan's trade and roughly one-third of its GDP. This renders many limited operations under Indian consideration a strategic threat to Pakistan and increases the likelihood of conventional escalation once conflict is initiated.

A limited operation against Pakistan still holds a high risk of inadvertent escalation. Indian capabilities with increasing standoff range, speed, and precision, employed in a limited operation, can threaten Pakistani strategic targets. This evokes fears that Indian operational aims

are unlimited, and produces pressure for escalation. Rocket launchers that are deployed to an LoC artillery duel could also hold at risk much of Islamabad and Rawalpindi. Defensively-minded suppression of enemy air defenses to protect Indian planes, or Indian air defenses moved close to the border to prevent Pakistani air strikes, could stoke fears of the Indian Air Force operating with impunity over Pakistani air space. Operations like Cold Start or a rapid naval blockade, which may rely on speed and early deep interdiction strikes on some nuclear-relevant targets, could sufficiently degrade Pakistan's capabilities amidst the fog and suspicion of major war that it would have to assume these were a prelude to counterforce.

Third party involvement is necessary – but not sufficient – for de-escalation between India and Pakistan. Only the two countries themselves can end a conflict and prevent escalation. They are unlikely to do so, however, without third-party crisis managers manipulating the cost (and opportunity cost) of conflict in order to incentivize one or both sides to refrain from, limit, or cease operations. Such third-party crisis management will be most effective if it is unified; begins immediately after the triggering event with preparatory coordination; effectively harnesses the required negotiating mechanisms based on information sharing, incentives to manipulate cost, and direct intervention; and lays the groundwork for avoiding future crises via confidence building mechanisms.

Intra-crisis escalation is becoming more rapid and dangerous, with each subsequent crisis more difficult to manage than the last. India's desire to punish Pakistan and Pakistan's obligation to respond motivates both to escalate quickly and take unprecedented risks, while continuing to misestimate one another's resolve and red lines. Crisis managers must now convince the Indian side to refrain from further moves, rather than simply creating the face-saving conditions in which de-escalation is politically feasible. Each subsequent crisis that is successfully managed makes future de-escalation efforts more difficult, as both sides gain confidence in their ability to pursue low-intensity conventional war, while the crisis managers' playbook grows increasingly worn. Just as both sides escalate their actions further and more quickly than in the past, so, too, must crisis managers escalate their strategies to bring about de-escalation, with no guarantee of success.

The United States remains the only third-party able to lead crisis management efforts in South Asia, though it will increasingly require the coordinated support of China, the United Nations (UN), and other bilateral and multilateral actors. Challenges including the constraints of precedent, previous unfulfilled pledges to address conflict drivers, perceptions of pro-India bias, and delayed involvement in recent crises have limited the U.S.'s options and credibility as a crisis manager. China's increasing regional equities might lead it to play a larger crisis management role, though there is a risk that such involvement could be intentionally or unintentionally escalatory. The UN, though slow to act and constrained by Security Council vetoes, remains a key actor in crisis management given its perceived impartiality, both sides' sensitivity to international reputation, and its presence on the ground. Despite the limits of third-party actors, India and Pakistan both dangerously assume that crisis managers will act prevent catastrophe.

Third parties can most effectively manage crises by employing a diverse, robust, and properly calibrated set of mechanisms to prevent, mitigate, and de-escalate conflict. These

mechanisms can be categorized into three types based on their modalities—information, incentives, intervention—and the type of escalation they address—accidental, inadvertent, and deliberate. By sharing, verifying, and clarifying information during crises, third parties can limit accidental escalation. By serving as a communication conduit between both sides, they can inform and shape mutual risk assessments and make inadvertent escalation less likely. By structuring incentives to prevent or limit the scope of kinetic action taken, they can reduce the likelihood of deliberate escalation. These mechanisms must be calibrated to the current level of conflict and anticipated escalatory potential, such that the steps taken are sufficiently meaningful to shape behavior while maintaining stronger options in reserve should conflict intensify. See Appendix B, Table 2 for a chart detailing specific examples of mechanisms in each category and level.

The objective of crisis managers is to elicit actions (“deliverables”) by one or both sides that serve to limit the intensity of escalation or to resolve the conflict. These can include pursuing non-military or less escalatory military responses, creating pauses in the crisis for potential de-escalation efforts, and facilitating face-saving exits to make conflict termination feasible. Other deliverables are driven by the specifics of the conflict escalation scenario and can involve private pledges of non-escalation to allow the fighting to plateau and ultimately lose momentum. The ultimate aim for deliverables is to pave the way for off-ramps from conflict.

I. Introduction

Understanding prospects and pathways for de-escalation of an India-Pakistan conventional war before it crosses the nuclear threshold requires a closer look at the pathways to war and escalation. Undoubtedly, the most commonly studied scenario for war is an Indian-led ground invasion of Pakistan in retaliation for a major, state-sponsored terrorist attack on Indian soil. However, there are several other paths to conflict designed as limited operations that possess the prospects for escalating up to war.

In this study, we first identify some starting contentions for the setting of India-Pakistan conflict and the dimensions and mechanisms of escalation. Next, we examine five scenarios for conflict between India and Pakistan. Finally we considered pathways to de-escalation. The scenarios describe the opportunity structure for de-escalation, and the second half of the paper discusses plausible modalities for crisis management and de-escalation including leverage points, routes to manipulate incentive structures (both strategic and operational), mechanisms, and deliverables.

Contentions on India-Pakistan Conflict

We begin with some motivating propositions or assumptions that should be stated from the outset. First, we contend that with the right motivation, the Narendra Modi-led Government of India is emboldened enough to instigate major military actions that risk escalation. Second, Indian strategy would involve both punishment and denial.¹ Fire assaults on the LoC, limited air strikes, or capture and occupation of some Pakistani posts along the LoC might all seek to degrade and deny “terrorist infrastructure.” Even attrition of Pakistani forces in a Cold Start or naval blockade help deny the Pakistani state’s war-waging capacity. Similarly, all these actions seek to punish Pakistan in order to coerce it into less revisionist, belligerent behavior towards India. Third, a real conventional fight could drag on and escalate because both parties are more matched than meets the eye. The material imbalance is not as stark;² readiness favors Pakistan, battle-hardened with 15 years of coordinated air-ground combat experience; and Pakistan would have a greater will to fight if defending against an Indian conventional attack. Fourth, neither side has a clear theory of victory other than to punish, outduel, and impose greater costs on the adversary to appear victorious in front of domestic audiences. Fifth, India would initiate the first major conventional move regardless of the initial trigger because Pakistan is unlikely to go conventional (rather than subconventional) first.³ Sixth, despite Pakistan’s worst case assumptions, Indian surprise is still possible, because Pakistan simply cannot afford to quickly mobilize defensively on all fronts after every plausible provocation.

¹ Yogesh Joshi and Anit Mukherjee, “From Denial to Punishment: The Security Dilemma and Changes in India’s Military Strategy towards China,” *Asian Security* 15 no. 1 (2018): 25-43.

² Christopher Clary, “Deterrence Stability and the Conventional Balance of Forces in South Asia” in *Deterrence Stability and Escalation Control in South Asia*, ed. Michael Krepon and Julia Thompson (Washington, DC: Stimson Center, 2013), 135-161; Stephen Cohen and Sunil Dasgupta, *Arming Without Aiming: India’s Military Modernization* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2010).

³ The first phrase comes from a 2013 NPS track 2 report. The second comes from a 2019 Stimson-held track 2 (report forthcoming). See Feroz H. Khan and Ryan W. French, “South Asian Stability Workshop, A Crisis Simulation Exercise,” NPS PASC Report, October 2013, <https://calhoun.nps.edu/bitstream/handle/10945/37069/2013%20008%20South%20Asian%20Stability%20Workshop.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.

Contentions on Escalation

We consider three dimensions of escalation. We take *vertical* escalation to be the increase in intensity of conflict through weapons, targeting, or frequency, *horizontal* escalation to be expanding the geographic scope of conflict, and *political* escalation to involve extreme changes in objectives, demands, or behavior.⁴ While conceptually useful to understand when lines are being threatened or crossed, these at times may bleed into one another.

We also define three types of escalation mechanisms. *Deliberate* escalation is intentional actions that produce intentional escalation due to the belief it increases the prospects of success either militarily, or by inducing the opponent to back down. It can also derive from concerns for national honor and a suboptimal but emotionally satisfying desire for vengeance, spurred by losses or public pressure.⁵ *Inadvertent* escalation is intentional actions that produce unintentional escalation essentially due to a misunderstanding of the opponent from misperception or miscalculation. The security dilemma, military organizations' preference for the offensive, and the fog and friction of war all contribute to inadvertent escalation pressures and are particularly pronounced in the India-Pakistan dyad.⁶ *Accidental* escalation is unintended actions—inevitable in more complex environments with multiple organizations operating in unfamiliar terrain under intense duress—that produce unintended results due to the fog and friction of war.⁷

II. Scenarios

We consider five possible conventional war scenarios that could put India and Pakistan in a conventional war: 1) artillery duels, 2) reciprocal airstrikes, 3) a territorial *fait accompli* in PoK, 4) a naval blockade, and 5) a ground invasion (Cold Start).⁸ The strategies all vary on several dimensions (see Table 1) including the domain, speed, salience, complexity, severity, and mechanism and shape of escalation. In each scenario, we consider the nature (of the initiating Indian operation motive, opportunity, and means), Pakistan's response, the prospects and shape of escalation, and the opportunity structure of de-escalation.

⁴ Forrest E. Morgan, Karl P. Mueller, Evan S. Medeiros, Kevin L. Pollpeter, and Roger Cliff, *Dangerous Thresholds* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2008), 18-19.

⁵ Rose McDermott, Anthony Lopez, and Peter Hatemi, "Blunt not the Heart, Enrage It: The Psychology of Revenge and Deterrence," *Texas National Security Review* 1 no. 1 (2017): 68-89.

⁶ Barry R. Posen, *Inadvertent Escalation: Conventional War and Nuclear Risks* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 12-23.

⁷ Morgan, Mueller, et al. *Dangerous Thresholds*, 19-28; Scott D. Sagan, *The Limits of Safety: Organizations, Accidents, and Nuclear Weapons* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993).

⁸ Note we exclude Indian asymmetric efforts to destabilize Balochistan because it is not obvious how it would result in conventional war but if it did, it would likely travel through one of the five pathways described above. Most likely Pakistan would retaliate through asymmetric means in Kashmir or Afghanistan and that could then provide the trigger for India to retaliate with one of the five scenarios laid out below.

Table 1: Conflict Scenarios and Escalation Risks

Type	Example	Probability	Tempo/ Speed	Geographic Salience	Operational Complexity	Perceived Severity	Escalation Risks				Shape of Escalation curve	Opportunity for De- Escalation?
							Type of Escalation	Deliberate Potential	Inadvertent Potential	Accidental Potential		
1. LOC Artillery Duel	Frequent Arty Duels/ Ceasefire Violations	Very High	Slow	Low	Low	Low	Vertical	Low	Low	Low	Bell curve	After Steam Vented
2. Reciprocal Air strikes	"Operation Bandar"	High	Slow to Fast	Low- Medium	Low- Medium	Low- Medium	Horizontal & Vertical	Medium	Medium	High	Step-wise Function	Intervals Between Major Sorties
3. Fait Accompli in POK	"Operation Kabaddi"	Medium	Medium to Fast	Low- Medium	Medium	Medium	Horizontal & Vertical	Medium- High	Low to Medium	Medium	S curve	Early or Late
4. Naval Blockade	"Operation Trident/ Python"	Low	Slow to Fast	High	Medium- High	Low-High	Vertical & Political	Medium- High	Medium to High	High	S curve OR diminishin g returns curve	Ideally Early; Potentially Late
5. Ground Invasion	"Cold Start"	Very Low	Fast	High	High	High	Vertical & Political	High	High	High	Exponenti al Curve	Very Early

Scenario 1: Line of Control Artillery Duels

A. Operation

Dueling cross-border fire on the LoC—a very high probability event—is a common, manageable steam-venting or even tacit bargaining phenomenon,⁹ but this could also create a pathway to war.¹⁰ At the very least, enough firing in a condensed period can charge a political environment such that a terrorist trigger could precipitate a crisis. An LoC operation can involve scaling up the intensity of violence on the LoC in terms of increased frequency or tempo of firing and ceasefire violations, enhanced lethality (e.g. sniper unit activity), and enhanced range and caliber (e.g. from automatic weapons to mortars to artillery), adding some to the risk of escalation. There is even a possibility of a fight intensifying to the use of guided multiple rocket launchers that can hit targets at a range of 70-90 km.¹¹ Initiation of a LoC ramp-up could be directed top-down by political leadership to signal resolve to bolster general deterrence but more often than not these operations can spin up from “autonomous military factors”¹² derived from tactical motives of denying and disrupting border hardening, flexing muscle or testing new commanders, gamesmanship (e.g. “counting coup”), or to avenge a gruesome humiliation.¹³

B. Response

Generally speaking, Pakistan would respond in kind across the LoC with its own repertoire of options. Some of these match India directly in terms of capabilities and systems it can bring to the LoC fight, while others are asymmetric, such as border action teams, terrorist infiltration, or instigation of local Kashmiri militants. A response can take place in the same or different sector of the LoC, or even along the working boundary in India’s more vulnerable Jammu sector.

C. Escalation

The traditionally low operational complexity lowers the risk of accidental escalation (despite some collateral damage), while low geographic salience and low severity dampen any pressures for deliberate or inadvertent escalation. Intra-LoC escalation of tempo, caliber, and lethality largely avoids political, horizontal, or vertical escalation.

In contrast, the introduction of area weapons with greater range, precision, and lethality could both appear quite provocative, create more entanglement and friction, and incite deliberation escalation. Armed drones or attack helicopters could be inserted in contested zones and

⁹ Neil Joeck, “Tacit Bargaining and Stable Proliferation in South Asia,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 13, no. 3 (September 1, 1990): 77–91, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402399008437420>. Ashley Tellis J., “A Smoldering Volcano: Pakistan and Terrorism after Balakot,” March 14, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/03/14/smoldering-volcano-pakistan-and-terrorism-after-balakot-pub-78593>. Happymon Jacob, *Line on Fire: Ceasefire Violations and India-Pakistan Escalation Dynamics* (New York City, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2019), 297. Refers to it as a boiling at a subcritical level.

¹⁰ Jacob, *Line on Fire*.

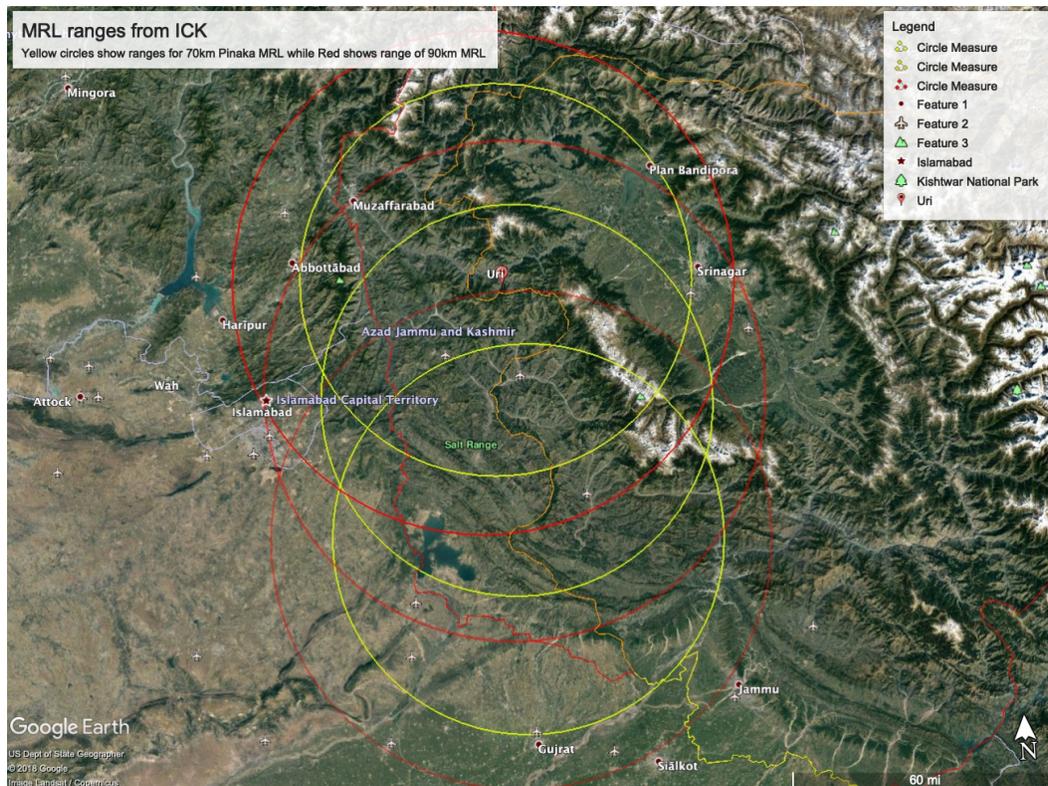
¹¹ Joy Mitra, “Tactical Assertiveness and Strategic Purpose,” *Second Sight* 1, no. 31 (2019), <https://www.satp.org/second-sight-volume-1-no-31#>. Ajai Shukla, “New, Lethal Pinaka Scores Bulls-Eye in Testing,” *Business Standard*, January 25, 2017, <https://ajaiashukla.blogspot.com/2017/01/new-lethal-pinaka-scores-bulls-eye-in.html>.

¹² For more on this, see Jacob *Line on Fire*, chapter 5, 171-254.

¹³ Hari Kumar and Ellen Barry, “Beheadings and Vengeance: A Cycle of Killing on a Border in Kashmir,” *New York Times*, May 15, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/15/world/asia/kashmir-jammu-india-pakistan-beheadings.html>.

potentially shot down.¹⁴ Long-range, multiple rocket launchers could be introduced to the LoC (Figure 1), which have the ability to hold at risk consequential political and military targets, particularly in Pakistan, and appear to threaten leadership decapitation.¹⁵ The risk of accidental escalation could increase if long-range fires approach denser civilian populations in undisputed territory or if more risky, complex operations (e.g. helicopter insertion surgical strikes) become more frequent and go awry with soldiers captured or brutally killed on public display.¹⁶

Figure 1: Map for Scenario 1 (Arty Duel)--Ranges of Indian MRL (Pinaka, 70-90km) if Moved to LOC posts



Spirals are more likely when parties are caught by surprise. Should autonomous military factors trigger an LoC artillery duel that suddenly breaks new spatial or lethality thresholds with rocket fire on mainland urban areas, leaders could be suddenly caught off-guard and overreact rather than treating this as a familiar choreography of tacit bargaining.¹⁷ Leaders looking to divert attention from slowing economies and rally nationalist sentiment might be more inclined to “select into” crises or larger conflicts.¹⁸

¹⁴ Jacob, *Line on Fire*, 308.

¹⁵ see appendix D, figure 6, p. 32

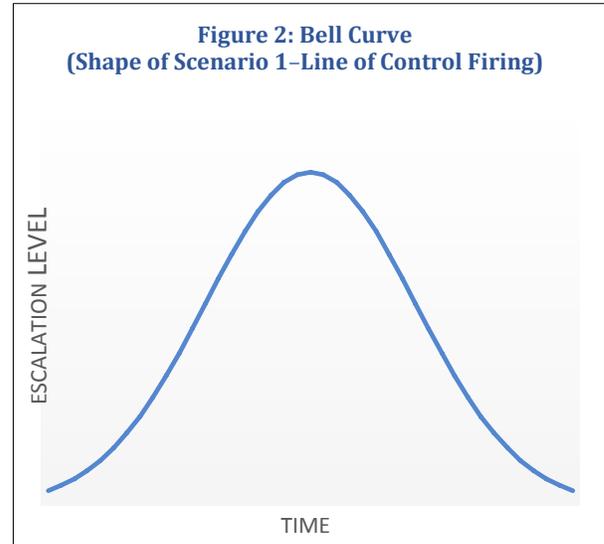
¹⁶ For instance, a black hawk down scenario in POK.

¹⁷ Tellis “A Smoldering Volcano”; Joeck “Tacit Bargaining and Stable Proliferation in South Asia.”; Jacob, *Line on Fire*, 297-298.

¹⁸ Christopher Clary, Sameer Lalwani, and Niloufer Siddiqui, “Public Opinion and Crisis Behavior in Nuclearized South Asia,” Unpublished Manuscript, 2019. Sameer Lalwani and Hannah Haegeland, “Anatomy of a Crisis: Explaining Crisis Onset in India-Pakistan Relations,” in *Investigating Crises: South Asia’s Lessons, Evolving Dynamics, and Trajectories*, ed. Sameer Lalwani and Hannah Haegeland (Washington, DC: Stimson Center, 2013).

D. De-escalation

The shape of the escalation is much like a bell curve (Figure 2) where, after a brief increase, the escalatory nature of the engagement begins to plateau and decline. The “ripeness”¹⁹ for de-escalation or intervention kicks in after enough time to “boil at a sub-critical level as a steam venting mechanism.”²⁰ Leaders in both countries as well as third-parties might have a better chance of restoring calm after allowing this venting or even accepting these shows of resolve as a mechanism for de-escalating a crisis.²¹ Rather than the typical de-escalation mechanisms at the brigade level, de-escalation after the introduction of more lethal, long-range weapons could necessitate a higher political authority and possible third-party support. Material incentives and information-based mechanisms need not be required, as simple expressions of concern, monitoring, and restraint could prove sufficient.



Scenario 2: Reciprocal Air Strikes

A. Operation

Due to a potential commitment trap, a now high-probability clash is tit-for-tat air strikes led off by Indian air strikes that precipitate a reciprocal action from Pakistan that spirals. Limited Indian air strikes on Pakistani targets including alleged terrorist support infrastructure (similar to Operation Bandar strikes on Balakot, Pakistan) would involve low levels of complexity to impose low-to-medium costs on the adversary of interdiction, punishment, and humiliation. Variations in the geographic depth, munitions, targets, and damage will shape perceptions of risk, provocativeness, and the prospects for vertical, horizontal, and political escalation.²²

Strikes would likely begin in low-salience areas (e.g. POK) and potentially deliberately escalate horizontally to more consequential territory (e.g. the Balakot strike). The payload could also vary in incitement from laser-guided bombs to air-launched or even ground-launched cruise missiles (e.g. Brahmos). Target type, casualties, and damage will also influence perceptions of severity and the thresholds crossed. While India may view striking Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) or Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) headquarters as justifiable, civilian or military targets caught in the fire could be

¹⁹ Drawing on a concept from I. William Zartman, “Ripeness: The Hurting Stalemate and Beyond” in *International Conflict Resolution After the Cold War*, ed. Paul C. Stern and Daniel Druckman (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 2000).

²⁰ Jacob, *Line on Fire*, 297.

²¹ After the Balakot crisis died down post March 1, the LOC began to intensify as a way for both sides to save face.

²² Arzan Tarapore, “Balakot, Deterrence, and Risk: How This India-Pakistan Crisis Will Shape the Next,” *War on the Rocks*, March 11, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/03/balakot-deterrence-and-risk/>; Rohan Mukherjee, “Climbing the Escalation Ladder: India and the Balakot Crisis in Policy Roundtable: The Future of South Asia,” *Texas National Security Review*, October 1, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-the-future-of-south-asia/#essay5>.

more incendiary. Pakistan being exposed and humiliated for its inability to detect or defend against Indian air strikes could also intensify political escalation and desires for retribution.

B. Response

Pakistan would retaliate against India's strike in a proportionate manner or even slightly lower, but would require some risk-taking on the offense to make the adversary divert defense resources. Pakistan might be able to retaliate with a slightly lesser response to the Indians (X-1) in the hopes of creating a natural off-ramp while publicly claiming to have matched India to save face domestically. Pakistan's previous experience of asymmetric air exchanges with more powerful adversaries like the Soviets in Afghanistan offers a model for this potential dynamic.²³

Tit-for-tat exchanges could continue for a while with both sides hitting easy, unimportant targets. Despite claims that Pakistan would be constrained due to the absence of target sets in India equivalent target to Pakistan-hosted terrorist training camps that India would strike, this discounts Pakistan's creativity and capacity to frame targets as alike and proportional. If India hit dirt and called it successful, Pakistan could do the same. If India destroyed terrorist infrastructure, Pakistan could target Indian military or civilian "state terror" infrastructure (like a vacant airfield or a paramilitary base in Kashmir) and claim this to be symmetric,²⁴ even with casualties,²⁵ like empty buildings or natural features.

C. Escalation

Analysts have suggested limited air strikes are appealing precisely because escalation can be controlled,²⁶ but, as Morgan and Mueller note, "any technology that enables a military force to fight with more speed, range, and lethality will enable that force to cross escalation thresholds faster."²⁷ Whether or not ground conflict inevitably follows,²⁸ there are several plausible pathways for accidental, deliberate, and inadvertent escalation.

Accidental escalation is always highly plausible amidst fog and friction, particularly when both parties put excessive confidence in the orderliness of standoff, speed, and precision. The risks increase along with the operational tempo. "Escalatory accidents are more prone to occur when forces must be configured to respond quickly," write Morgan and Mueller.²⁹ Accidents are inevitable in tit-for-tat exchanges between modern fighter strike packages when crossing borders while in hot pursuit or if weapons or systems integration malfunction, commercial airliners are mistaken for warplanes, bombs miss targets,³⁰ or faulty intelligence causes them to strike the

²³ Sebastien Roblin, "Pakistan's F-16s Battled Soviet Jets - and Shot Down the Future Vice President of Russia," *The National Interest*, March 16, 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/pakistan%E2%80%99s-f-16s-battled-soviet-jets%E2%80%94and-shot-down-future-vice-president-russia-47717>.

²⁴ George Perkovich and Toby Dalton, *Not War, Not Peace? Motivating Pakistan to Prevent Cross-Border Terrorism* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press India, 2016), 111.

²⁵ Perkovich and Dalton *Not War, Not Peace?*, 121.

²⁶ Tellis "A Smoldering Volcano."

²⁷ Morgan, Mueller, et al. *Dangerous Thresholds*, 168.

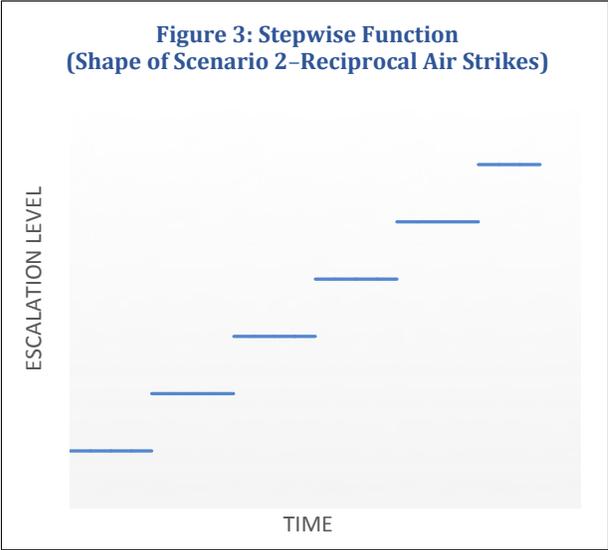
²⁸ Perkovich and Dalton *Not War, Not Peace?*, 117-118.

²⁹ Morgan, Mueller, et al. (2008: 165)

³⁰ Roblin, "Pakistan's F-16s Battled Soviet Jets - and Shot Down the Future Vice President of Russia."; Eric Schmitt, "Crisis in the Balkans: Human Error; Wrong Address of Embassy in Databases" *New York Times*, May 10, 1995 <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/05/10/world/crisis-in-the-balkans-human-error-wrong-address-of-embassy-in-databases.html>; Manu Pubby, "Shooting Down Mi17 a big mistake: IAF Chief" *the Economic Times*, October

wrong ones.

Deliberate escalation is possible if both sides are able to hit each other but have not satisfied their war aims of inflicting greater pain on the other or convincing their domestic audiences that they have done so. The India-Pakistan air war might start slow and engage unimportant targets but, if unsatisfying to domestic audiences, could begin to speed up over time, resembling a step-wise growth function in escalation and last for days or weeks (Figure 3). Leaders can escalate limited strikes into protracted, repeated engagements due to emotional reactions from surprising losses (e.g. a pilot capture), fear of public sanction for unmet expectations, or a pursuit to recover sunk costs. Pakistan merely punching above very low expectations could satiate its own domestic political audience, but India may need to double down if early operations do not yield a highly favorable loss-exchange.



Airstrikes are also susceptible to inadvertent escalation in several ways. First and foremost, there may simply be miscalculation by the coercer state of what is a safe or acceptable action (or amount of civilian collateral damage) leading to a seemingly disproportional retaliation by the target state. Second, if the air war drags on longer than expected, India might deliberately threaten Pakistan’s support elements and ability to generate retaliatory sorties (e.g. hitting airfields, bases, communications). This action, which would also degrade essential elements of Pakistan’s strategic deterrent, could induce fears of preemptive counterforce and cause Pakistan to start mobilizing strategic capabilities as a defensive measure.

Third, India’s desire for clean, frictionless operations could motivate missile strikes or suppression of enemy air defenses (SEAD), which would generate inadvertent pressures. As Pakistani air defenses improve, India may decide to pursue or hard-kill rather than soft-kill SEAD to engage ground targets. Both could threaten Pakistan’s C2, appearing as the beginnings of a disarming first strike campaign which could incentivize mobilization of strategic assets.³¹ Furthermore, Pakistan could treat SEAD as an attack even if the final target were non-state actors, which could motivate reciprocal retaliation against Indian military targets and be perceived by the Indians as vertical escalation. The dilemma could also be reversed if Indian S-400 air defenses are pushed forward to the border. Fearing the S-400 would offer the Indians a

5,2019 <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/shooting-down-chopper-on-feb-27-was-big-mistake-says-iaf-chief/articleshow/71437387.cms>; “Pakistan Scrambles F-16s after SpiceJet Flight Confusion,” *Times of India*, October 17, 2019, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/pakistan-scrambled-f-16s-after-spicejet-flight-confusion/articleshow/71640530.cms>.; Margaret Antidze and Jack Stubbs, “Before Syria, Russia Struggled to Land Air Strikes on Target,” *Reuters*, October 26, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-bombing/before-syria-russia-struggled-to-land-air-strikes-on-target-idUSKCN0SK1WF20151026>.

³¹ Perkovich and Dalton *Not War, Not Peace?*, 115-116.

400 km envelope of impunity over Pakistani territory, Pakistan might feel pressure to preempt Indian defenses. For this, it could potentially use tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs) or overcompensate in its retaliatory effort, which produce a disproportionate effect.

D. De-Escalation

Unlike some other scenarios where there is a precipitous spike in escalation, a reciprocal airstrikes campaign might look like a step-wise function where there could be several opportunities for bilateral or third-party/multilateral de-escalation efforts. Somewhat similar to the LoC scenario, a reciprocal airstrikes campaign involves intervals with breaks or lulls in activity that allow for initiators to claim victory, defenders to evaluate losses, and third parties to initiate dialogue. Certainly, these intervals may grow shorter and more intense over a protracted period. Nevertheless, there may be some wisdom in allowing early stage engagements to play out as a way to release pressure and deflate false optimism.

All modalities for de-escalation could prove useful. Facilitating information—intelligence, assessment of likely outcomes, and advice—could help manage accidental escalation. Positive incentives could help offset the costs of forbearance while negative incentives could alter the perceptions of frictionless war. In the immediate term, bilateral communication mechanisms could arrest some inadvertent escalation while, in the medium to long-term, arms control and confidence-building measures could prove useful to mitigate inadvertent pressures.

Scenario 3: Fait Accompli in POK

A. Operation

The recently more assertive Indian position towards POK,³² combined with the *de facto* LoC principle of “grabbers, keepers” suggests a low-to-medium probability for land grab fait accompli operations.³³ A fait accompli makes a “calculated risk:” the defender will tolerate the loss rather than go to war.³⁴ While such activity declined since 1971 due to denser fortifications, several have been planned and conducted, even after nuclearization.³⁵ Opportunities could increase with changing climatic conditions, advances in electronic warfare and special operator capabilities, or the willingness to incur the costs of a direct assault.

Today, India possesses motives, means, and opportunity for a fait accompli. Motivations date as far back as the summer of 2001 when the Indian military had planned a similar classified operation, named Operation Kabaddi, to effectively realign the geography of the LoC by seizing between 25-30 Pakistani posts ranging from Ladakh down to Jammu, with roughly 15 discrete

³² POK is India’s terminology for Pakistan administered/controlled Kashmir. Soutik Biswas, “Kashmir Crisis: How to Read India’s Threat to Pakistan,” *The BBC*, September 20, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-49737886>; Shaurya Gurung, “Army War-Gamed Possible PoK Action; Plans Read: Army Chief General Bipin Rawat,” *The Economic Times*, September 23, 2019, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/army-war-gamed-possible-pok-action-plans-ready-army-chief-general-bipin-rawat/articleshow/71252198.cms?from=mdr>.

³³ Happymon Jacob, *Line on Fire*, 217-224.

³⁴ Altman, Dan. "By fait accompli, not coercion: how states wrest territory from their adversaries." *International Studies Quarterly* 61, no. 4 (2017): 881-891.

³⁵ Jacob *Line on Fire*

brigade-sized operations.³⁶ In the contemporary environment, there have been serious discussions about efforts to “recover” POK and “sanitize” or “realign” the LoC. Opportunity is ever-present with the cover of routine cross-border engagement or justifications of hot pursuit or even pre-emption of militant infiltrations. Finally, the means are also available if procurements for mountain warfare on India’s Eastern border—acclimatized mountain divisions, high-altitude gear, strategic airlift, apache helicopters, and light mobile artillery—are repurposed for POK.³⁷ Military leaders have also claimed that the Indian Army can extend the LoC by 5-10 km within a 7-10 day limited war before crossing any nuclear thresholds.³⁸ If so, India could seize a vulnerable, sparsely populated salient along the LoC, and then position forces to effectively defend it.

With a limited POK operation, India could permanently realign the LoC by seizing vulnerable points, like Bhimber Gali or Haji Pir pass, to “flatten bulges,” enhance supply lines, reduce infiltration vulnerability, and improve overall defensibility.³⁹ Importantly, Haji Pir is almost within the aforementioned 5-10 km range and has long been sought by the Indian military, which returned it after the 1965 war (Figure 4).⁴⁰ A second option could be to seize and hold the territory as a bargaining chip to leverage in return for some coercive demands of Pakistan, such as eliminating terrorist camps or handing over LeT leader Hafiz Saeed. Controlling this territory could also shift the international community’s perceived baseline for bargaining, from Indian-controlled Kashmir to POK. A third option might be the 1962 Chinese model: seize portions of POK, eliminate Pakistani posts, and then withdraw, all to teach Pakistan a lesson and raise the threat of future punishment.

India may see realignment as a viable choice if it perceives the strategy to be quick, easy, limited, and unlikely to escalate into a wider conventional conflict because it occurs in areas of low political salience and low visibility amidst cross-LoC exchanges. India might justify this the same way Pakistan justified Kargil: an operation of “preemptive defense.”⁴¹ The operational

³⁶ Ibid., 1-6; The title of the operation, Kabaddai, named after the popular South Asian village game, is meaningful. The game’s objective is for a “raider” on one team to cross over to the opposing team’s side to tag as many opponents as possible, and then return back unscathed. In the case of the military operation, the goal would be occupation and seizure with as minimal contact as possible, a fait accompli.

³⁷ Joshi and Mukherjee, “From Denial to Punishment,” 10.

³⁸ H.S. Panag, “Amit Shah’s Political Aim to Recover PoK Is Not Backed by Military Capacity,” *The Print*, September 19, 2019, <https://theprint.in/opinion/modi-govt-claiming-pok-is-great-for-diplomacy-but-wont-mean-much-militarily/293751/>.

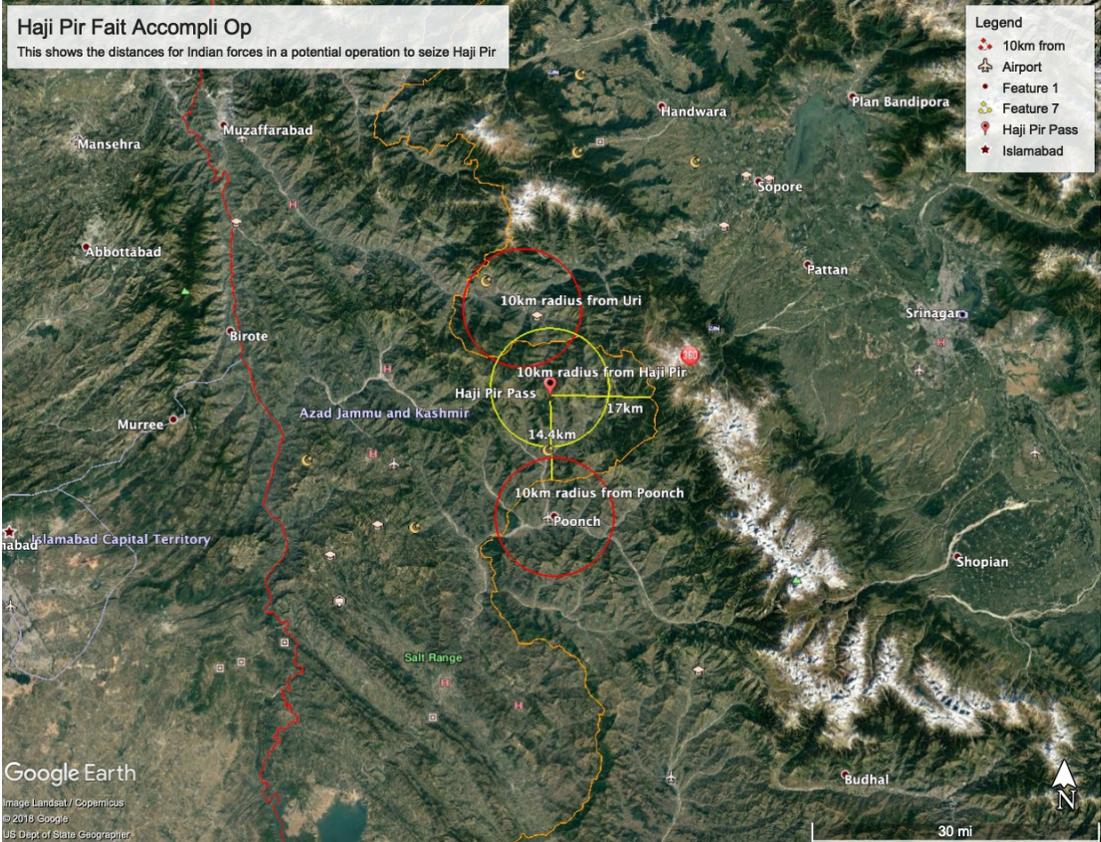
³⁹ Manu Pubby, “After Pulwama Attack: Military Puts All Cards on the Table,” *The Economic Times*, February 19, 2019, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/after-pulwama-attack-military-puts-all-cards-on-the-table/articleshow/68018205.cms?from=mdr>.

⁴⁰ “Mention-in-Despatches I: The Capture of the Haji-Pir Pass,” *Uday* (blog), n.d., https://medium.com/@der_Wille/mention-in-dispatches-the-capture-of-the-haji-pir-pass-36df29aca860; P.C. Katoch, “Battle of Haji Pir: The Army’s Glory in 1965,” *Journal of Defence Studies* 9, no. 3 (2015): 53–74. https://idsa.in/jds/9_3_2015_BattleofHajiPir

⁴¹ Zafar Iqbal Cheema, “The Strategic Context of the Kargil Conflict: A Pakistani Perspective,” in *Asymmetric Warfare in South Asia: The Causes and Consequences of the Kargil Conflict*, ed. Peter Lavoy (New York City, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 57-58.

tempo would likely be slow, possibly rely on surprise or prepositioned forces, and unfold in a series of phases over days or weeks (like Kabaddi), but contestation could even last months.⁴²

Figure 4: Map for Scenario 3 (POK Fait Accompli) - Distance to Haji Pir from Indian positions in Uri and Poonch



B. Response

After the revocation of Article 370, Pakistan has likened the Modi government to Nazi Germany and compared acquiescence on August 5 to Munich, making acceptance of a fait accompli in POK—like other past India “nibbling” in Siachen or Chorbit La—an impossibility. Because Pakistan’s political-military and economic center of gravity is in close proximity to the LoC, a fait accompli poses strategic implications for Pakistan, risking escalation.

Repelling the fait accompli operation with the forces Pakistan has in theater would be difficult due India’s advantages of surprise, material superiority, and robust supply lines.⁴³ A riposte to seize a vulnerable Indian salient to bargain with would be challenged by India’s heightened alert level. If unable to repel or riposte, Pakistan might go on the offensive as India did in Kargil with area weapons and artillery as part of an intensive, costly effort to dislodge the Indians and retake

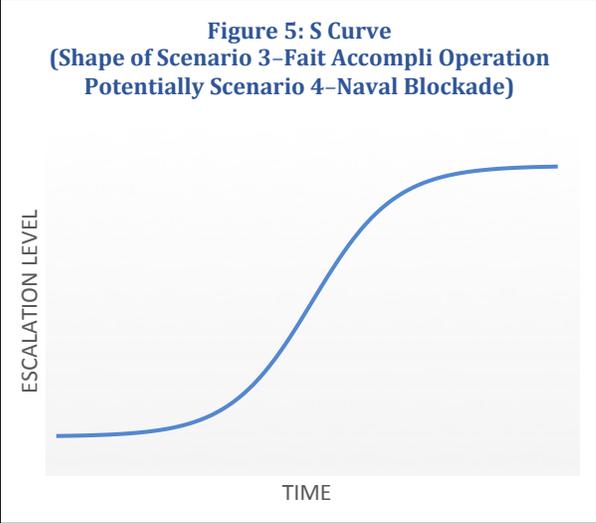
⁴² Though certainly a different environment for media and public opinion than 20 years ago, India has proven its able to withstand much of this after August 5 actions in Kashmir.

⁴³ because India would likely not need to maintain the deniability of irregular forces as Pakistan did in Kargil. Even though Pakistan has been calling out Indian aggression under Modi for years now, even they were caught by surprise and underestimated Indian moves on both Feb. 26th and August 5th.

territory. With significant improvements in Indian artillery,⁴⁴ Pakistan may be disadvantaged in numbers, range, quality, mobility, and high ground. Pakistan may also opt to escalate vertically with air power; doing this, however, would invite in Indian air superiority and air defenses, like the S-400, which could deny Pakistan’s Air Force access to the fight.

C. Escalation

Ground based operations to repel, riposte, or retake seized territory constitute retaliation but may not necessarily be escalatory. Both the operational complexity and perceived severity of the operation could be low-to-medium, since it would be conducted at the brigade level, likely without air power support reducing prospects for inadvertent escalation. Furthermore, in a low-complexity environment of modest severity, the risk that an accidental event, like an unintended strike on a civilian target, would lead to unintended reactions is low-to-medium.



That said, the risk of deliberate escalation is likely and could be categorized as medium-to-high. For instance, Pakistan might escalate horizontally by opening up another contested front as punishment, or escalate vertically by conducting deep interdiction strikes on Indian supply lines to the LoC to deny and weaken India’s grip on seized territory. If India were to botch the fait accompli operation or underestimate Pakistani defenses, it may get bogged down and bled in a protracted mountain war. Pakistan could also unleash waves of asymmetric attacks by local Kashmiris, forcing India to escalate with more aggressive military operations. If Pakistan deliberately escalated to an air campaign against newly-seized Indian positions or supply lines and India moved forward its S-400 air defenses to cover the LOC, this would inadvertently provide Indian fighter plans with a vast protection envelope over Northern Pakistan, putting the political-military-economic heartland under threat. Pakistan could then be driven to risky actions from attacking Indian air defenses to generating some other forms of tactical nuclear risk.

D. De-Escalation

If the shape of escalation follows an S curve (Figure 5), the most opportune moments for bilateral or third-party de-escalation would occur in the early phase of a conflict—before the successful completion of a fait accompli—or after Pakistani attempts to retake positions are beaten back conventionally. A third-party might engage in pivotal deterrence⁴⁵ to structure

⁴⁴ Harsha Kakar, “Mod Govt’s Artillery Modernisation Would Change Game at Pak Border,” Observer Research Foundation, November 6, 2018, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/modi-govts-artillery-modernisation-would-change-game-at-pak-border/>.; Ajai Shukla, “Induction of New Artillery Guns Shows Promise for Indigenous Defence Firms,” *Business Standard*, February 6, 2019, <http://ajaiashukla.blogspot.com/2019/02/induction-of-new-artillery-guns-shows.html>.

⁴⁵ Tim Crawford, *Pivotal Deterrence: Third-Party Statecraft and the Pursuit of Peace* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003).

incentives for both parties to de-escalate and return to the status quo ante and serve as an information clearinghouse to verify both Indian withdrawal and Pakistani militant demobilization.⁴⁶

Scenario 4. Naval Blockade

A. Operation

A naval blockade constitutes a low-probability conflict. Because the naval domain is where India has the most confidence in its favorable military balance—India has carrier aviation, quantitative and qualitative superiority, and greater operational experience⁴⁷—it is possible to imagine how India might find a naval blockade appealing due to perceptions that it is clean, less contestable, and could exhaust Pakistan at a steady pace without uncontrolled escalation.⁴⁸ Since setting up a blockade could take days or weeks⁴⁹ to achieve some level of surprise to box in the Pakistan Navy, India could use an exercise as a cover to position ships and submarines for the operation.

As a distant blockade would be both resource-intensive, difficult, and disruptive to Gulf shipping, most likely India could set up a close-in maritime exclusion zone (MEZ) enforced by attack submarines, mines, carrier aviation, and long-range sorties from ground bases to interdict all Karachi-bound shipping.⁵⁰ (Port Qasim and Port Karachi make up 90% of Pakistan's total trade).⁵¹ A distant blockade that sat out of range of Pakistani anti-ship missiles could support this MEZ and contain Pakistan's naval or anti-submarine warfare.⁵²

⁴⁶ Jay Wise, "Satellite Imagery, Remote Sensing, and Diminishing the Risk of Nuclear War in South Asia" (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, November 5, 2018), <https://www.usip.org/publications/2018/11/satellite-imagery-remote-sensing-and-diminishing-risk-nuclear-war-south-asia>.

⁴⁷ Joy Mitra, "After Pulwama: What Are India's Retaliation Options?," *The Diplomat*, February 19, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/02/after-pulwama-what-are-indias-retaliation-options/>; Clary "Deterrence Stability and the Conventional Balance of Forces in South Asia," 141-147.

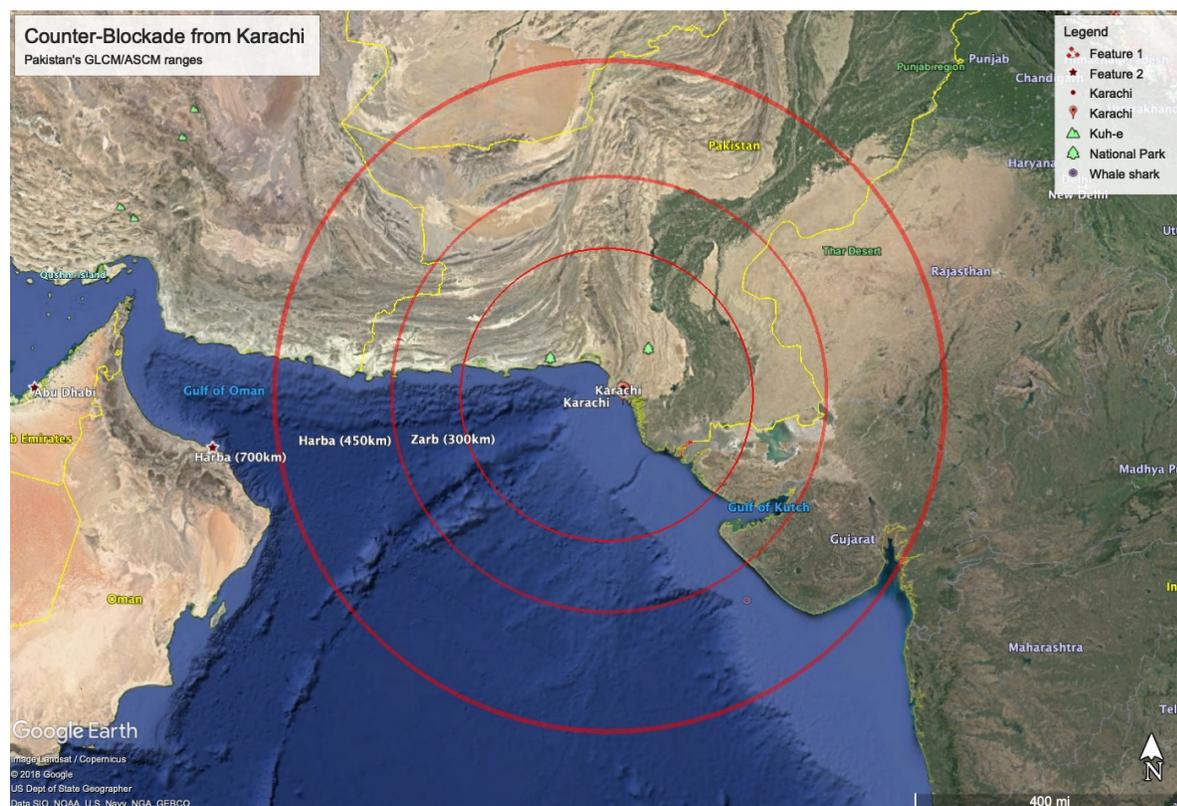
⁴⁸ Feroz Khan and Ryan French "South Asian Stability Workshop"; discussions with USG officials; interview with Shankar; "Post Balakot Strike, Indian Navy Hunted For Pakistani Submarine for 21 Days," *India Today*, June 23, 2019, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/post-balakot-indian-navy-hunted-pakistani-submarine-for-21-days-1554601-2019-06-23>.

⁴⁹ Fiona S. Cunningham, "The Maritime Rung on the Escalation Ladder: Naval Blockades in a U.S.-China Conflict," Unpublished Working Paper, 2019; Sean Mirski, "Stranglehold: The Context, Conduct, and Consequences of an American Naval Blockade of China," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 36 (3), 2013, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2012.743885>.

⁵⁰ Cunningham "The Maritime Rung on the Escalation Ladder"; Iskander Rehman, *Murky Waters: Naval Nuclear Dynamics in the Indian Ocean* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2015), pp. 16-20; An Indian bolt from the blue blockade ("Wet Start") seems plausible because while Pakistan may flush out its navy after some significant cross-border kinetic activity, it does not as a rule do so at the start of a crisis but would do so, most likely because the frequency with which this occurs could make such a standard operating procedure operationally expensive. For instance, during the Pulwama Balakot crisis, even though the crisis began on Feb. 14th, Pakistan still had its navy in port as of Feb. 26th. They appear to have been moved only after the Balakot strike and retaliation on Feb. 26-27. See Vinayak Bhat, "Pakistan's Entire Navy Has Been out at Sea after India Bombed Balakot," *The Print*, March 11, 2019, <https://theprint.in/defence/pakistans-entire-navy-has-been-out-at-sea-after-india-bombed-balakot/204122/>.

⁵¹ 95% of Pakistan's trade is seaborne and 35% of seaborne trade goes through Port Qasim while 60% goes through Port Karachi. Trade also constitutes close to 40% of Pakistan's GDP. See Rehman, *Murky Waters*, 59; Naveed

Figure 6: Map for Scenario 4 (Naval Blockade) - Pakistani Cruise Missile Ranges from Karachi



B. Response

Pakistan might respond with a number of defensive measures as India’s operational costs and challenges mounted: appeal to international sympathy, maneuver around the blockade by land routes and smuggling on the Makran coast, clear a channel with mine-hunters, and escort Pakistani flagged ships. However, the international community may prove still very indulgent of India and unsympathetic to Pakistan, and Pakistan energy shortages could still impose severe pressure on the economy.

More offensive measures would involve retaliation against the blockade: a reciprocal but minimal blockade against an Indian port backed by minimal demonstration actions; attacks on Indian naval bases and airfields supporting the blockade; quick dispersal of naval assets to stretch and run the blockade;⁵³ and directing attacks on the blockade with long-range maritime patrol and fighter aircraft, anti-ship cruise missiles, and submarines. Vertical escalation seems

Khan, “Pakistan Needs to Focus on Developing Seaports,” *The Express Tribune*, September 2, 2019, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2047167/2-pakistan-needs-focus-developing-seaports/>

⁵² Mirski “Stranglehold”; see also Map appendix D, figure, p. 34

⁵³ Pakistani sub hid from Indian Navy for 21 days: “Post Balakot Strike, Indian Navy Hunted For Pakistani Submarine for 21 Days.” *India Today*.

more likely, and standoff ground launched cruise missile strikes would be preferred (Figure 6). Pakistan, though, likely lacks the requisite reconnaissance, surveillance, and target acquisition technology (specifically radars) for over-the-horizon targets and would need direct assistance from China.⁵⁴

C. Escalation

Once a sustainable blockade is fully implemented and achieves a stable equilibrium, its incremental coercive strangulation could prove devastating for Pakistan and lock in overwhelming Indian advantages, limiting any effective contestation. The stakes would then lead to Pakistani desperation and high prospects for deliberate escalation as a form of brinkmanship or to catalyze international intervention. Some analysis suggests Pakistan has the ability to weather a blockade for a long period,⁵⁵ but some Pakistani naval commanders fear it could strangle Pakistan's economy and warfighting potential (both nuclear red lines) between a few days to 2-3 weeks,⁵⁶ tilting Pakistan toward panicked, riskier behavior *before* the blockade is fully in place.

While a naval blockade could start slowly and quietly, once detected, rapid escalation could erupt in the race to strike first before it is fully locked in. Before being bottled up, the Pakistan military would also have strong incentives to turn to its land-based strike platforms and attempt to pre-empt anything that looked like the beginnings of a blockade before the noose was tightened. Some Pakistani analysis has even suggested the idea of employing nuclear-weapons on anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCMs), maritime patrol aircraft, and diesel submarines to generate risk and dissuade India from a blockade, much like the Nasr against Cold Start.⁵⁷ Anticipating this, India, too, might pursue a more "proactive" approach to blind, suppress, or disarm these land-based conventional or even nuclear counter-blockade operations, whether targeting missile launchers, runways, hangars, or Pakistan's ships and submarines in harbor (i.e. shooting the archer, not the arrow). In short, first-strike incentives in the naval domain create severe crisis instability and inadvertent escalation risks. Finally, the complexity of coordinated operations on land, air, and sea also generates high risks of accidental escalation.

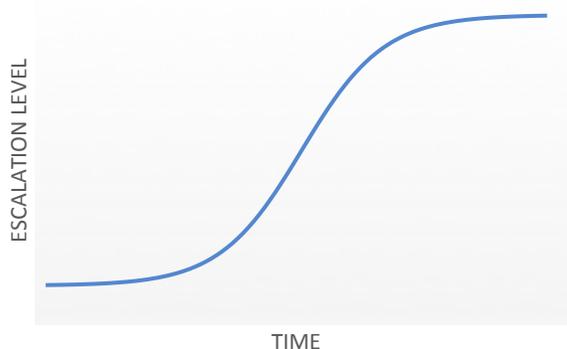
⁵⁴ Stephen Biddle and Ivan Olerich, "Future Warfare in the Western Pacific: Chinese Antiaccess/Area Denial, US AirSea Battle, and Command of the Commons in East Asia," *International Security* 41, no. 1 (2016): 7–48.

⁵⁵ Clary "Deterrence Stability and the Conventional Balance of Forces in South Asia," 144-45.

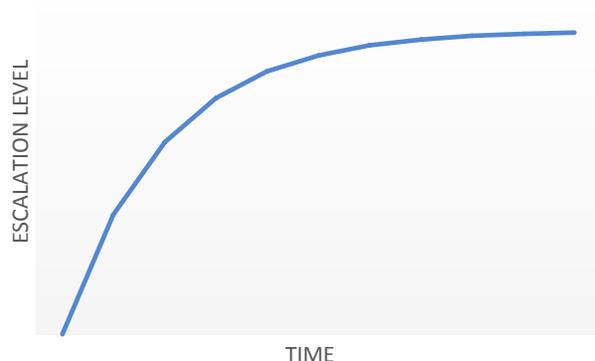
⁵⁶ Azam Khan "S-2: Options for the Pakistan Navy," *Naval War College Review* 63, no. 3 (2010): 7, 10 <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1643&context=nwc-review>; A retired Indian naval officer concurs that Pakistan would be starved of energy within 2 weeks.

⁵⁷ Khan "S-2."; Aleem Anwar, "Asymmetric Contest in Nuclear South Asia," *Pakistan Army Green Book*, Rawalpindi, Pakistan: Army General Headquarters, 2013, pp. 135-141.

**Figure 7: S Curve
(Shape of Scenario 3–Fait Accompli Operation
Potentially Scenario 4–Naval Blockade)**



**Figure 8: Diminishing Returns Curve
(Potentially shape of Scenario 4–Naval Blockade)**



D. De-escalation

The S-curve shape of escalation (Figure 7) would suggest two potential points of de-escalation in the conflict—either very early during blockade formation (e.g. phase 0) or after it is fully operational and starting to effectively interdict shipping (phase 4).⁵⁸ Between these two periods would fall a window of high-intensity kinetic activity in the race to set up or prevent the noose of a blockade. After it was set up, the blockade would bring about a slow process of choking the economy to coerce the Pakistan state. During this period, some space would open for both bilateral bargaining and third-party interventions and incentives to de-escalate.

The types of intervention most useful in the early stage to arrest potential escalation would be informational—whether privately shared with one party or both, or potentially publically declared in order to restore conventional deterrence. Diplomatic efforts could also galvanize international pressure for fear of disrupted Persian Gulf shipping and global energy price shocks. After the set up of a blockade, the interventions most likely to de-escalate the crisis would be support/pressure for bargaining and dialogue or direct material interventions such as supporting overland trade to Pakistan via Central Asia and China or providing armed escorts for naval convoys to enter/exit Pakistani ports.

Scenario 5: Ground Invasion (e.g. Cold Start)

A. Operation

Though a very unlikely probability, Cold Start, a limited, bolt-from-the-blue, cross-border operation by Indian troops into Pakistani territory, has traditionally been seen as the most likely scenario under which conventional conflict between India and Pakistan could escalate to nuclear use. Cold Start was formulated to carve out a ‘Goldilocks option’ for limited yet highly aggressive conventional war.⁵⁹ It is intended to punish Pakistan to compel it to eliminate terrorist

⁵⁸ See Escalation Curves, Appendix C, p. 31.

⁵⁹ Sources consulted include: George Perkovich and Toby Dalton, *Not War, Not Peace? Motivating Pakistan to Prevent Cross-Border Terrorism* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press India, 2016), 73-103; Walter Ladwig III, “A Cold Start for Hot Wars? The Indian Army’s New Limited War Doctrine,” *International Security* 32, no. 3 (2008):

infrastructure. In theory, several integrated battle groups (IBGs)—nimble units stationed close to the border, combining mechanized infantry, armor, and artillery, and backed by close air support as well as long-range artillery to seal the battlefield—would conduct shallow incursions along different axes to seize 50-80 km (or perhaps less) inside Pakistan.⁶⁰ The operation envisions swift action (within 72-96 hours after the order is given), before Pakistan mobilizes or the international community can intercede, that is narrow enough to avoid tripping Pakistan’s nuclear red lines.⁶¹

While the doctrine is relatively clear about the mechanics and objectives of seizing territory, there are two components of this process that remain flexible: the location and size of the territory seized.⁶² A restrained version of Cold Start could seize a small, low-value, and more controllable amount of desert territory within Sindh province, which would likely not cross any red lines.⁶³ Alternatively, India could seize an area of strategically salient territory, like a border city in Punjab, or seek to bisect a key transportation corridor.

B. Response

Barring capitulation, Pakistan would have three response options to a Cold Start operation: defend conventionally, riposte conventionally into vulnerable Indian border territory, or use TNWs early to slow Indian advances and signal nuclear risk. Pakistan has built up its conventional defense capabilities to blunt and slow a Cold Start operation, and therefore may have confidence in them.⁶⁴ Pakistan could also riposte sub-conventionally by attacking within

158–90.; Walter Ladwig III, “A Cold Start for Hot Wars? The Indian Army’s New Limited War Doctrine,” *International Security* 32, no. 3 (2008): 158–90; Christopher Clary, “ISSF Article Review 44 on ‘Pakistan’s Battlefield Nuclear Policy: A Risky Solution to an Exaggerated Threat.’ [13 October 2015],” November 13, 2015, <https://networks.h-net.org/node/28443/discussions/94869/issf-article-review-44-%E2%80%9Cpakistan%E2%80%99s-battlefield-nuclear-policy-risky.>; Walter Ladwig III, “Indian Military Modernization and Conventional Deterrence in South Asia,” *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 38, no. 5 (2015): 729–72.; Anit Mukherjee, *The Absent Dialogue: Politicians, Bureaucrats, and the Military in India* (New York City, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2019).; Anit Mukherjee, “Fighting Separately: Jointness and Civil-Military Relations in India,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 40, no. 1–2 (2017): 6–34.; Andrew Small, *The China-Pakistan Axis: Asia’s New Geopolitics* (New York City, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁶⁰ India has recently started to form the IBGs, but deficiencies remain in several other categories including materiel (sufficient ammunition, modernized weapons) and cross-service integration, particularly of joint air and ground operations. Additionally, the complex border terrain and the advantageous deployment of the Pakistani military, which would expect India’s response after a terror attack, make Cold Start operationally difficult and its success uncertain. Indeed, the Indian Army may be trending away from the coercive bargaining model of Cold Start and towards shorter punishment operations (e.g. “surgical strikes”). See Perkovich and Dalton *Not War, Not Peace?*, 94–7; Mukherjee *Absent Dialogue*; Mukherjee “Fighting Separately”; Ladwig “Indian Military Modernization,” 729, 759, 760–1; lack of interest in CS during simulation (at least as first move)

⁶¹ Perkovich and Dalton *Not War, Not Peace?*, 73; Ladwig “A Cold Start for Hot Wars?,” 165.

⁶² Perkovich and Dalton *Not War, Not Peace?*, 73–103.

⁶³ Peter Liberman, *Does Conquest Pay?: The Exploitation of Occupied Industrial Societies* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995).; David Edelstein, *Occupational Hazards: Success and Failure in Military Occupation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008).

⁶⁴ Ladwig “Indian Military Modernization”; Maimuna Ashraf, “Pakistan’s Consolidating Conventional Deterrence: An Assessment,” *South Asian Voices*, December 7, 2018, <https://southasianvoices.org/pakistan-conventional-deterrence-assessment/>.; Also, Almost a decade ago, senior Army leadership believed they possessed sufficient conventional defense countermeasures using swarm techniques with anti-tank and air defenses to defeat Cold Start. See, Rodney Jones, “Nuclear Escalation Ladders in South Asia” (Defense Threat Reduction Agency, 2011), <https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=716189>.

the seized territory or in India. Finally, Pakistan would likely attempt to catalyze third-party intervention by portraying Cold Start as a violation of its sovereignty.

Despite the questionable efficacy of Cold Start and Pakistan's conventional defenses, Pakistani strategists still view it with alarm, fearing a splendid success would allow India to seize the advantage and expand its objectives.⁶⁵ Pakistan has responded to the Cold Start doctrine by developing the Nasr, a low-yield TNW delivery system.⁶⁶ The Nasr is intended to fill a self-perceived gap in Pakistan's conventional defenses and nuclear deterrent that requires credible asymmetric escalation.⁶⁷

C. Escalation

There are several ways the conflict could escalate rapidly. First, Indian deep-interdiction air strikes could knock out Pakistan's command and control, warning systems, and most of its air force. This could precipitate inadvertent escalation to the strategic level out of fear of a splendid, pre-emptive counterforce strike or deliberate escalation to signal the military degradation red line was being crossed. Second, the Pakistan military's fears of losing too much too quickly—whether territory or forces—may pressure them to use Nasr missiles to deny or slow down Indian armored battalions. This could be done by firing a demonstration shot, hitting nothing or just one brigade, or unleashing a broad salvo of Nasr missiles in a desperate attempt to slow down the entire Indian advance.

Third, Indian IBGs could begin to overrun individual Pakistani brigades tasked with Nasr batteries, putting them in a “use it or lose it” predicament. This possibility is exacerbated by the likelihood that Nasrs would be tasked for signaling purposes to deter India and that battlefield commanders would have launch authority, thus increasing the chance of inadvertent escalation in the fog and friction of war.⁶⁸ Finally, Indian anticipation of Pakistani TNW could trigger a pre-emptive nuclear counterforce operation.⁶⁹

Alternatively, Indian forces could underperform and begin to lose the conflict if, for example, military leaders overestimated conventional superiority.⁷⁰ Pakistan might then press the advantage, or India might attempt to expand the war—gambling for resurrection⁷¹—as a way of saving face, creating less-controllable escalation scenarios. Ultimately, compounded

⁶⁵ Neil Joeck, “Prospects for Limited War and Nuclear Use in South Asia” in *Deterrence Stability and Escalation Control in South Asia*, ed. Michael Krepon and Julia Thompson (Washington, DC: Stimson Center, 2013), 112-117.; Jones “Nuclear Escalation Ladders in South Asia,” 16.

⁶⁶ Sankaran “Pakistan's Battlefield Nuclear Policy,” 121.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 122.; Vipin Narang, *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era: Regional Powers and International Conflict* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2014).

⁶⁸ Mansoor Ahmed, “Pakistan's Tactical Nuclear Weapons and Their Impact on Stability,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, June 30, 2016 <https://carnegieendowment.org/2016/06/30/pakistan-s-tactical-nuclear-weapons-and-their-impact-on-stability-pub-63911>.

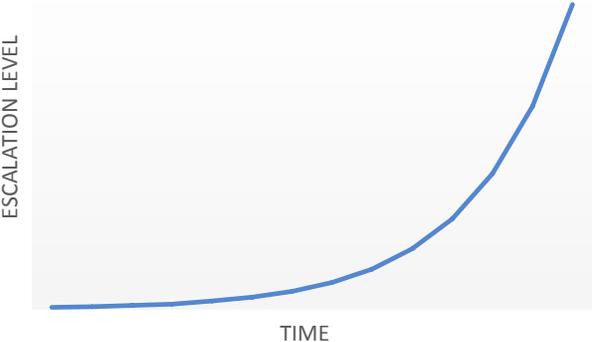
⁶⁹ Christopher Clary and Vipin Narang, “India's Counterforce Temptations: Strategic Dilemmas, Doctrine, and Capabilities,” *International Security* 43, no. 3 (2019): 7–52.

⁷⁰ Perkovich and Dalton *Not War, Not Peace?*, 93-94.

⁷¹ George Downs and David Roche, *Optimal Imperfection?: Domestic Uncertainty and Institutions in International Relations* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995).

misperceptions of intentions and proportionality at each stage of retaliation, form the heart of escalation and push conflict, inexorably, up the ladder.⁷²

**Figure 9: Exponential Curve
(Shape of Scenario 5–Cold Start)**



D. De-escalation

Cold Start is likely to prove the most difficult scenario to de-escalate, as its use indicates significant resolve and risk tolerance by the Indian side, and escalation follows an exponential curve (Figure 9). The few windows for de-escalation that do exist will be brief, early (before or within 48-72 hours) and require significant, coordinated diplomatic efforts.

The first window would be during the air interdiction campaign and/or while IBG alert levels are raised or the units have begun moving and Pakistan forces surge in response. The U.S., or any third-parties that detect this, could privately urge Indian leaders to curb the scope of the offensive—perhaps just a mobilization of IBGs to signal India’s readiness and resolve in order to catalyze third-party intervention. Third-parties could also share intelligence and war game findings to induce caution combined with incentives, like public praise, trade, and serious international retributive action against Pakistan, allowing Indian leaders to claim a win.

Should the operation commence, third parties could shift to damage-control mode, encouraging and incentivizing both sides to limit their actions on the battlefield and seeking to correct any dangerous misperceptions. Were Indian troops to seize and hold a small salient before retreating back across the border, they could claim success in embarrassing Pakistan, limit their liability and crossing nuclear thresholds, and also allow Pakistan a face-saving claim of successful conventional defense. Third parties could also publicly threaten severe repercussions and international isolation after any nuclear use. If Pakistan feared for its survival, Islamabad might implore Beijing—in the interest of its CPEC investments or Chinese nationals—to take the unlikely step of opening a second front on the Sino-Indian border, thus diverting Indian forces.⁷³

Crisis managers should use appropriate high-end mechanisms, including drawing down diplomatic missions and threatening serious trade and political consequences while searching for

⁷² Ladwig “A Cold Start for Hot Wars?” 172.
⁷³ Small, *The China-Pakistan Axis*, 9-47.

potentially unexpected off-ramps. Opportunities for de-escalation would not improve until some form of military stalemate is reached (assuming uncontrolled escalation did not occur). Both sides have limited operational capacity to continue sustained hostilities due to shortages of ammunition, fuel, and spare parts, which could facilitate a face-saving cessation of hostilities and withdrawal.⁷⁴ However, shortages could be intensified only if the U.S., China, Russia, France, and other suppliers coordinate.

III. De-Escalation

While the previous section described the scenarios for escalation and *opportunity structure* for de-escalation, the second half of the paper discusses plausible *modalities* for crisis management and de-escalation, including challenges, key actors, leverage points, and strategies, as well as mechanisms and deliverables. Third-party crisis management will be most effective if it is unified; begins immediately after the triggering event with preparatory coordination; effectively harnesses negotiating mechanisms based on information sharing, incentives to manipulate cost, and direct intervention, as required; and lays the groundwork for avoiding future crises via confidence-building mechanisms.

Broad Challenges to De-escalation and Conflict Management

Several recurring themes emerged from the crisis dynamics literature, interviews, and convenings on conventional war between India and Pakistan that will complicate de-escalatory pathways. These include the challenges of speed, overconfidence, U.S. partiality, idiosyncratic features, and structural drivers.

First, crises are becoming more dangerous and de-escalation more difficult. Crises are proceeding more rapidly from triggering event to conflict than they did previously, limiting windows of opportunity for crisis managers to prevent further escalation. As India and Pakistan enter their third nuclear decade, both sides are increasingly confident in their ability to control escalation while engaging in direct conventional conflict. This risk-taking, combined with repeated indications that both sides continue to misestimate one another's resolve and red lines, makes uncontrolled escalation more likely. With India's more bellicose responses to repeated terrorist incidents attributed to Pakistan-based groups, the short-term challenge for crisis managers becomes one of convincing the Indian side to step back from the brink, rather than simply creating the conditions in which such a step is politically feasible, assuming that both sides are interested in finding a face-saving exit.

⁷⁴ Ladwig "A Cold Start for Hot Wars?," 166.; Perkovich and Dalton *Not War, Not Peace?*, 73-103.

Table 2: De-Escalation Mechanisms and Deliverables

	Information Mechanisms	Incentive Mechanisms	Intervention Mechanisms	Deliverables
High Risk	<p>Either/both:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • third-party messaging campaign about nuclear effects to citizens in region • third-party distribution of potassium iodide to citizens in region • outreach through diaspora communities to raise public awareness and drive demand for termination 	<p>Pakistan negative:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • declaration as state sponsor of terrorism • removal of Major Non-NATO Ally status • threat (by China) to curtail CPEC investment • threat (by Gulf states) to withdraw economic assistance <p>Pakistan positive:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • provision of civilian/security assistance • pledge to tie India's admission into the NSG to Pakistan's • pledge to enter into Civil Nuclear Agreement <p>India negative:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • removal of Major Defense Partner status • suspension/abrogation of U.S.–India Civil Nuclear Agreement • threat to push for revocation of India’s hosting of G20 summit • restrictions on foreign military assistance/sales • suspension/cancellation of military and diplomatic initiatives • suspension/cancellation of tech- and info-sharing agreements <p>India positive:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • pledge to involve in Afghanistan negotiations and reconstruction • pledge not to sanction for S-400 purchase/use <p>Either/both negative:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • restriction on access to SWIFT financial system • restriction on access to dollar clearing services • threat to publicly announce end-use violations <p>Either positive:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • commitment to recognize one side's position on Kashmir <p>Either/both positive:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • White House visit 	<p>Pakistan:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • direct kinetic action against leaders of Pakistan-based militant group <p>Either/both:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • imposition of sanctions against key officials and groups • visa restrictions on either/both countries’ nationals in the event of a nuclear exchange • full drawdown of diplomatic missions • raising of travel warning threat to highest level • sailing of assets from the 5th Fleet into the North Arabian sea • threat/action to interdict certain levels of conflict through denial techniques (disabling conventional systems with cyber operations, disrupting signals with electronic warfare assets, or intercepting missiles with Aegis-enabled guided missile destroyers) • provision of valuable material or informational support to help one party strike a less escalatory blow 	<p>Either/both:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • situationally specific steps to limit and de-escalate conflict

	Information Mechanisms	Incentive Mechanisms	Intervention Mechanisms	Deliverables
Medium Risk	<p>Either/both:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sharing of war game results with negative/escalatory outcomes • sharing of nuclear effects and casualty estimates • clarification of adversary actions/intent through dialogue in response to concerns from both sides 	<p>Pakistan negative:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • threat to withdraw support for Pakistan’s IMF program • threat to push for FATF blacklisting • threat to revoke major non-NATO ally status • threat to designate as state sponsor of terrorism <p>Pakistan positive:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • pledge to reinstate civilian assistance • pledge to reinstate military assistance • pledge to reinstate IMET activities <p>India negative:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • threat to block UN Security Council membership • threat to block Nuclear Suppliers Group membership • threat to revoke Major Defense Partner status <p>India positive:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • pledge to push for UN Security Council membership • pledge to push for/remove hold barring NSG membership • reinstatement of India’s GSP status • technology transfer concessions 	<p>Either/both:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • direct calls from high-level officials • visits by high-level officials • public calls for restraint by third-party governments • public calls for restraint by business leaders • public calls for restraint by religious leaders • convening of UNSC for emergency meeting/briefing • issuance of press statements by UNSC • issuance of presidential statements by UNSC • passage of resolutions by UNSC under Chapter 6 authority • passage of resolutions by UNSC under Chapter 7 authority • reinforcement of UN observer mission in Kashmir • direct involvement by UN Secretary General • announcement of ordered departure for diplomatic missions • raising of travel warning threat level • issuance of travel warning for regional country (China) 	<p>Pakistan:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • private assurance that tactical nuclear weapons will not be deployed <p>India:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • public announcement of ending conflict to pursue non-military response <p>Either/both:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • private pledge to refrain from action above a certain level • private pledge to refrain from further escalation • exchange of prisoners • temporary ceasefire for humanitarian assistance • temporary ceasefire for civilian evacuation pauses in the conflict • domestic messaging claiming victory to create space for de-escalation

	Information Mechanisms	Incentive Mechanisms	Intervention Mechanisms	Deliverables
Low Risk	<p>India:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assisting investigations into the triggering event via the FBI or other agencies <p>Either/both:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> verifying pledges made by either side through sensors, satellite imagery, or other intelligence assets communicating adversary reactions and responses to generate mutual understanding of risk 	<p>Either/both:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> public calls for de-escalation private unified messaging from third parties against further military action threats to suspend or offers to strengthen trade, diplomatic and military ties 	<p>Either/both:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> elevation of travel advisories diplomatic missions on authorized departure status 	<p>Pakistan:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> condemnation of trigger event investigation of trigger event legal action against responsible parties <p>India:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> pledge to refrain from retaliatory military action pledge to refrain from horizontal/vertical escalation pledge to remain within certain thresholds in military action pursuit of legal action in lieu of military response <p>Either/both:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> speeches from leaders to contain domestic audience pressure conciliatory gestures from leaders to contain domestic audience pressure <p>Both:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> establishment of India-Pakistan Joint Investigative Team
Evergreen	<p>Either/both:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> private discussions passing messages between both sides 	<p>Either/both:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> political and economic concessions and sanctions public praise or threats by third-party officials signaling of concern through the UN and other fora 	<p>Either/both:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> choreographed meetings and visits 	<p>Pakistan:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> replacement of involved officials with new staff <p>Either/both:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> initiation and use of private backchannel communications pursuit of political/diplomatic/judicial/economic action restriction of conflict to less escalatory modalities and geographies private assurances of mutually agreed non-escalation temporary general ceasefire temporary ceasefire for of religious or other holiday positive public and private statements and gestures withdrawal of troops/equipment

Second, more third-party crisis managers are needed, and largely absent, as the U.S. loses leverage and interest in de-escalation. Washington's perceived tilt toward New Delhi and its less immediate involvement at the outset of recent crises have raised questions in the region about its future role as first responder and crisis manager of last resort. After having used many of its levers towards counterterrorism and Afghanistan cooperation, the United States has few left to coerce Pakistan. While more options exist with India, U.S. officials seem reluctant to use coercive pressure for fear of damaging a partnership seen as key to balancing China. American crisis management efforts have also lost credibility after failing to ensure the fulfillment of previous pledges made to end crises, including by Pakistani leaders to prevent future attacks.⁷⁵ A "fool me twice, shame on me" sentiment has emerged that makes de-escalation more difficult with each subsequent crisis. Mutually agreeable, face-saving exit pathways do still exist, but they will require greater creativity, a more robust "playbook" of options to de-escalate future conflict, and coordinated, active involvement of third parties, including China, Russia, Gulf States, the United Kingdom (UK), the European Union (EU), and the UN.

Third, averting nuclear use is becoming increasingly difficult with every subsequent crisis, making preventative action vital. It is imperative that the U.S. and other third parties focus both on coordinating crisis management efforts in advance of future crises and on conflict prevention strategies to reduce the likelihood of conflict over time. Readiness efforts among key third parties could include crisis scenario tabletop exercises and regular coordination meetings to limit the need for ad hoc management mechanism development during a crisis.⁷⁶ Also important is careful study of previous crises, such that third-party managers are familiar with de-escalatory mechanisms that have succeeded previously and could be invoked again. In order to address the underlying issues driving escalation dynamics on the subcontinent, these actors should likewise identify future confidence-building mechanisms (CBMs) to advocate for during the window of opportunity that emerges following a crisis.

Fourth, a well-developed playbook of crisis management options is necessary but not sufficient to achieve de-escalation. Conflict termination pathways will be contingent on the prevailing political situation in the region and in Washington,⁷⁷ the presence or absence of key officials and military and intelligence assets at the time of the conflict, and the elements of chance that emerge over the course of the conflict itself. The pathway taken to escalation will thus directly shape and condition the available outlets for de-escalation, though not in a predictable, linear fashion.⁷⁸ These contingencies have the potential to both provide an unexpected off-ramp or to intensify the stakes of conflict in a way that makes war termination more difficult.⁷⁹ Such elements of chance

⁷⁵ These include President Bill Clinton's promise to take a "personal interest" in resolving the Kashmir dispute as a means of ending the Kargil conflict and Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf's pledge to stop future infiltrations into Kashmir that was subsequently publicized and (implicitly) vouched for by Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage to end the Twin Peaks crisis in 2002.

⁷⁶ Interview with former U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan, September 10, 2019.

⁷⁷ Interview with former U.S. high-ranking security official, August 5, 2019.

⁷⁸ Rajesh Rajagopalan, *Second Strike: Arguments about Nuclear War in South Asia* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2005), 127.

⁷⁹ The recent Balakot crisis provided an example of a fortuitous event that facilitated de-escalation in the form of the Indian pilot's capture and safe return. It also included a near-miss negative contingency in the presence of a high-ranking Indian Army officer in close proximity to the area Pakistan targeted in its airstrikes. Had this officer (whose presence was apparently unknown to the Pakistanis) been injured or killed in the strike, the situation might have escalated further.

are difficult to plan for, but are important for crisis managers to recognize and use to their advantage in negotiations with both sides.

Key Actors in Third-Party Crisis Management

Crisis management efforts in South Asia will continue to center on action by the United States, with the potential for increasing participation by China and multilateral efforts through the UN. Other third parties likely to play supporting roles include Russia, the Gulf states, the EU, and the UK. Multilateral fora such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) are unlikely to contribute significantly to crisis management. For further details on the incentives of and roles played by each actor, see Appendix F.

Though the U.S. remains the most influential and capable third-party crisis manager in South Asia, it has become a victim of its own success. In the event of a crisis, U.S. officials should leverage relationships to communicate early, coordinate internally amongst embassies and agencies as well as other governments, frame the crisis in terms of nuclear risk, and involve the most senior U.S. security officials should escalation seem likely or imminent. While many of these recommendations follow the standard template of crisis management used worldwide, a few features distinguish U.S. management of South Asian crises and merit mention.

First, the precedent of previous crisis management efforts acts as a constraint on U.S. freedom of action as a third-party mediator, as both sides read Washington's actions against its previous steps as indicators of how seriously the U.S. views the crisis, whether it is taking sides, and what level of conflict would be tolerated. While this raises the risk that either or both sides could wrongly (and dangerously) interpret those signals, it also provides Washington with a powerful tool for signaling its concern via the choreography of previous crisis management efforts. A thorough understanding of those approaches by U.S. crisis managers is thus vital to avoiding inadvertent signaling through deviations from precedent. Second, the U.S. role in managing South Asian crises is also distinct because of Washington's record of successfully intervening to de-escalate decades of regional crises, both pre- and post-overt nuclearization.⁸⁰ This history gives the U.S. an unrivaled seat at the table in times of crisis and significant experience from which to draw. It also carries the risk of overconfidence by both India and Pakistan in the U.S.'s role as a crisis manager. Both sides have come to dangerously assume that, simply because it has before, Washington will have the capacity and will to de-escalate regional conflict. A moral hazard has emerged whereby both adversaries feel comfortable crossing conflict thresholds, in part, because they believe the U.S. will step in to avert disaster.⁸¹ Washington can benefit from its outsized reputation to the extent that the two sides take its interventions seriously. The risk remains, though, that India and Pakistan could exceed Washington's capacity to manage crises without recognizing it in time.

China's role as a regional crisis manager has the potential to grow, though there is a risk that it could spur escalation in interceding to achieve its own strategic aims. As a rising actor with investments and influence across South Asia and territory at risk from the effects of potential

⁸⁰ This record of success holds overall despite skepticism regarding the fulfillment of specific pledges made to end previous crises. While there is greater skepticism surrounding promises to resolve drivers of conflict, confidence remains in overall U.S. crisis management capabilities.

⁸¹ "Crisis Dynamics in Southern Asia: Conflicts, Challenges, and Choices" Conference (Washington, DC, September 18, 2019).

nuclear use, China is a natural candidate for regional crisis manager. Beijing has traditionally “backstopped” U.S. efforts and urged restraint without becoming deeply involved in negotiations. Were it to participate more actively, and particularly because such involvement would be seen as a meaningful deviation from precedent, China could wield considerable influence with Pakistan. It could exert leverage by restricting intelligence and military equipment transfers, suspending access to the Beidou military satellite system,⁸² and threatening reductions to CPEC investment. The potential exists, however, for China to play an inadvertently or intentionally escalatory role in South Asian crises.⁸³ Given its maritime competition and territorial disputes with India and deep relationship with Pakistan, China could pursue its own interests by attempting to punish India and assist Pakistan in a potential conflict. Such a strategy could also allow Beijing to test-drive its military technology in combat conditions.⁸⁴ In so doing, China would be playing with fire by risking potential uncontrolled escalation on its borders. The U.S. and other crisis managers should emphasize the dangers of such an outcome to encourage Beijing’s active cooperation in de-escalation efforts.

Other supporting third-party actors including Russia, the Gulf States, the UK, and the EU could leverage significant ties with both sides to incentivize de-escalation. All four have historical, religious, trade, and/or strategic ties to the region and have the ability to usefully echo messages of restraint in diffusing crises. Any action through the UN Security Council would require the support of permanent members Russia and the UK (as well as China), and Russia is especially influential due to its defense ties to India and, increasingly, Pakistan. The EU, as a major trading partner of both sides with a sizeable diplomatic presence, is also well-positioned to support de-escalation efforts. The Gulf states, meanwhile, have relationships with both sides through their significant guest worker populations and energy sales, in addition to links with Pakistan through shared religious affiliation. While all three are unlikely to play a decisive role in future crises, they have the ability to exert potentially useful influence with both sides, especially by restricting access to fuel and military supplies and cautioning against escalation, including through religious authorities in the case of Gulf states.⁸⁵

Among multilateral fora, the United Nations is the best equipped to support crisis management efforts, while others including the OIC, SCO, and SAARC are unlikely to play a significant role. The UN is likely to be most useful as a device for signaling consensus among members of the Security Council (UNSC) on the need for de-escalation through use of emergency meetings, briefings, statements, and resolutions. Other avenues for involvement include direct mediation by the UN Secretary General and a review of or increased investment in the UN observer group in Kashmir.⁸⁶ While actions including the imposition of sanctions would not take effect quickly

⁸² “Pakistan’s reliance on US GPS ends as China’s Beidou Navigation Satellite System has started to cover entire Pakistan.” *The Times of Islamabad*, February 13, 2018, <https://timesofislamabad.com/13-Feb-2018/pakistan-s-reliance-on-us-gps-ends-as-china-s-beidou-navigation-satellite-system-has-started-to-cover-entire-pakistan>.

⁸³ Indeed, a U.S. official suggested in an interview that China played an “escalatory” role during the Balakot crisis. While we have been unable to verify this statement, it raises the possibility that Beijing might have fanned the flames during an already dangerous situation.

⁸⁴ Interview with Chinese think tank analyst, March 8, 2019.

⁸⁵ Indeed, while only by happenstance as he was on a previously scheduled visit to the region, Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohamed Bin Salman met with leaders in both India and Pakistan in the aftermath of the February Pulwama attack in an attempt to de-escalate tensions.

⁸⁶ Interview with Former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for International Security, U.S. Department of State, November 14, 2019.

enough to directly impact parties to the conflict, the threat or movement towards their passage would be a significant signal. Other multilateral fora including the OIC, SCO, and SAARC are neither equipped nor motivated to participate in crisis management efforts, save for limited calls for mutual restraint.

Crisis Management and De-Escalation Strategies

Having identified the key actors with a role in de-escalation efforts, the analysis now turns to the specifics of crisis management strategies. First, and fundamentally, third-party involvement is necessary—but not sufficient—for de-escalation between India and Pakistan. Only the two countries themselves can end a conflict and prevent escalation. They are unlikely to do so, however, without third-party crisis managers manipulating the cost (and opportunity cost) of conflict in order to incentivize one or both sides to refrain from, limit, or cease operations.

The section that follows focuses on two distinct yet closely associated categories: the specific actions crisis managers can take (what we term “*mechanisms*”) and the steps they should seek to elicit from India and Pakistan (described as “*deliverables*”). There are three types of mechanisms third parties can use to encourage restraint: *information*, *incentives*, and *intervention*. Crisis managers can employ *information mechanisms*, clarifying misperceptions of the adversary’s behavior, serving as a coordination conduit between both sides, verifying whether certain actions were taken and assigning responsibility, sharing intelligence and assessments about likely war outcomes to encourage restraint, and suggesting potential de-escalatory pathways and deliverables. *Incentive mechanisms* encompass inducements for restraint and punishments for risk-taking involving economic, political, military, and other leverage points. *Intervention mechanisms* refer to the direct use of diplomatic or military assets to jam systems, block cyber capabilities, obstruct or withhold supplies and/or intelligence access, or target equipment in order to make the prosecution of war more difficult.

These three categories of mechanisms, while generally useful, are tailored to best address certain types of escalation risks. Information mechanisms have the potential to mitigate both accidental and inadvertent escalation. They can reduce accidental escalation risk by allowing a third party with intelligence resources to act as both a conduit and a clearinghouse of information and assessment to privately adjudicate when unintentional actions were committed and to verify adherence to potential commitments. They can also address inadvertent escalation by facilitating India-Pakistan communication and mutual understanding of risk in crisis (by means of public and private dialogue or open secrets/leaks⁸⁷) to guide risk assessments and mitigate security dilemmas between both sides when the credible commitment problem⁸⁸ is acute and “tacit bargaining”⁸⁹ is insufficient. Incentive mechanisms and to some extent intervention mechanisms might be most useful in managing deliberate escalation by structuring incentives to prevent or limit the scope of kinetic action taken (e.g. incentivizing X-1) while still enhancing deterrence,

⁸⁷ Austin Carson, *Secret Wars: Covert Conflict in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).

⁸⁸ Barbara F. Walter, “The Critical Barrier to Civil War Settlement,” *International Organization* 51, No. 3 (Summer 1997), pp. 335-364.

⁸⁹ Ashley J. Tellis, *India’s Emerging Nuclear Posture: Between Recessed Deterrent and Ready Arsenal* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2001), https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1127.html; Neil Joeck, “Tacit Bargaining and Stable Proliferation in South Asia,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 13, No. 3 (1990), pp. 77-91.

or by providing other sources of political wins.⁹⁰ Intervention mechanisms can also address some inadvertent risks by, under certain circumstances, providing advice on targets and methods to one or both sides that could dampen inadvertent escalation spirals. It is important to recognize that many of these measures would bear consequences beyond the target country, such that a mechanism employed vis-à-vis India would represent either a political win or loss for Pakistan. This could be a useful dynamic in certain instances, but must be considered. After all, a measure invoked as a reward for Indian restraint could be perceived negatively in Pakistan, and vice versa. In some cases, they are also mutually exclusive.

Mechanisms can be further categorized by their relative *cost* to execute—in terms of both effort and political capital—and the intensity of their expected *impact*, yielding low-, medium-, and high-end options. These three categories correlate with the perceived danger of a given situation or immediacy of the threat of nuclear use. For example, in cases in which nuclear escalation appears increasingly likely, crisis managers can calibrate their response to use medium- and high-end strategies. Low-end options can be appropriate early in conflict scenarios, but higher-end options could also be required early on should a conflict follow an especially escalatory trajectory. Likewise, for more drawn-out conflict scenarios, low-end options could become effective later in the progression should fighting plateau. There is also a basket of “evergreen” mechanisms that can be effective during all stages of a conflict. These are the most commonly used conflict management strategies and should be applied repeatedly throughout a conflict.

Deliverables, in contrast, remain relatively consistent over the course of a crisis and vary only to the extent that different off-ramps become available if and when the crisis escalates to a conflict. Depending on the circumstances of the conflict and the timing of their use, deliverables can both seek to limit the intensity of escalation or to resolve the conflict. There is often overlap between those designed to limit and resolve—indeed the most effective deliverables check both boxes. Some deliverables designed to limit escalation, however, could make subsequent attempts to resolve the conflict more difficult. For example, responding with inflammatory public rhetoric rather than military action could intensify domestic audience pressures. Third parties should be attentive to these risks and seek to manage them appropriately.

Evergreen, Low-, Medium-, and High-end Conflict Management Mechanisms and Deliverables⁹¹

A challenging and vital step for crisis managers is to properly calibrate the mechanisms they employ based on the current and predicted future intensity of the conflict. Doing so is more art than science and should aim to ensure the mechanisms employed sufficiently convey concern and structure incentives while keeping some powder dry should conflict intensify further.

Over the course of a conflict, crisis managers can rely on a number of *evergreen mechanisms* that remain effective and relevant at any stage. Evergreen information mechanisms include private discussions with both sides, the provision of a communication and coordination conduit between India and Pakistan,⁹² and intelligence and assessment sharing to prevent

⁹⁰ Deliberate escalation can be motivated either to enhance intra-war deterrence or for domestic political reasons. Incentive mechanisms can either help the target state bolster their deterrence through less escalatory means, or help them obtain political wins through non-kinetic means.

⁹¹ For summary details, see Table 2 in Appendix B, pp. 27-30.

⁹² Nayak and Krepon, *The Unfinished Crisis*, 42.

misunderstandings and deter further escalatory movements.⁹³ Intelligence sharing, though complicated by concerns over revealing sources and methods, has proven effective in exposing responsibility for the triggering event⁹⁴ and planned adversary actions to avoid dangerous misunderstandings and emphasize escalatory risk.⁹⁵ Incentive mechanisms such as political and economic concessions and sanctions, public praise or threats by U.S. and international officials,⁹⁶ and the signaling of concern through the UN and other multilateral fora⁹⁷ can effectively constrain escalation pathways. Choreographed meetings and visits to delay and discourage escalation are the only generally appropriate intervention mechanisms, as military intervention options are more suited to high-intensity situations.⁹⁸

Evergreen deliverables that third parties can call for throughout a conflict include setting up and maintaining private backchannel communications,⁹⁹ pursuing political or diplomatic action versus military, restricting military action to less escalatory modalities and geographies, giving private assurances of mutually agreed non-escalation,¹⁰⁰ and creating pauses in the conflict via temporary ceasefires for religious or humanitarian reasons. Other deliverable options focus on actions intended to create space for both sides to step down from conflict, including pursuing accountability for the triggering incident, returning hostages, declaring a temporary ceasefire along the LoC,¹⁰¹ replacing involved officials with new staff,¹⁰² and making positive public and private statements and gestures. Should such attempts succeed and either one or both sides seek war termination, follow-on deliverables specific to de-escalation can include the end of warship patrols¹⁰³ and/or withdrawal of troops, timed to coincide with external developments as required for face-saving purposes (for example, the successful completion of an election security mission or a religious or national holiday).¹⁰⁴

In addition to the evergreen mechanisms detailed above, third party international crisis managers are most likely to succeed in managing a *low-intensity conflict with relatively low-cost, low-*

⁹³ Sameer Lalwani and Hannah Haegeland, ed., *Investigating Crises: South Asia's Lessons, Evolving Dynamics, and Trajectories* (Washington, DC: The Henry L. Stimson Center, 2018), 79, 196, 202; Michael Krepon and Nate Cohn, ed., *Crises in South Asia: Trends and Potential Consequences* (Washington, DC: The Henry L. Stimson Center, 2011), 34. Forrest E. Morgan, Karl P. Mueller, Evan S. Medeiros, Kevin L. Pollpeter, and Roger Cliff, *Dangerous Thresholds: Managing Escalation in the 21st Century* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2008), 20.

⁹⁴ Nayak and Krepon, *US Crisis Management in South Asia's Twin Peaks Crisis*, 32, 37.

⁹⁵ This proved vital in de-escalating the 1988 Brasstacks crisis, when the United States shared intelligence with both sides to verify that neither was equipped for combat. (See Lalwani and Haegeland, *Investigating Crises*, p. 79 and Krepon and Cohn, *Crises in South Asia*, p. 34.) It was also significant following the 2008 Mumbai attack when the United States verified that a threatening phone call made to Pakistan's Prime Minister was a hoax and not made by the Indian Prime Minister. (See Lalwani and Haegeland, *Investigating Crises*, p. 206 and Nayak and Krepon, *The Unfinished Crisis: US Crisis Management after the Mumbai Attacks*, p. 13.)

⁹⁶ Polly Nayak and Michael Krepon, *The Unfinished Crisis: US Crisis Management after the 2008 Mumbai Attacks* (Washington, DC: The Henry L. Stimson Center, 2012), 20.

⁹⁷ Nayak and Krepon, *The Unfinished Crisis*, 20.

⁹⁸ Nayak and Krepon, *US Crisis Management in South Asia's Twin Peaks Crisis*, 29; Nayak and Krepon, *The Unfinished Crisis*, 58; Krepon and Cohn, ed., *Crises in South Asia*, 21.

⁹⁹ Lalwani and Haegeland, *Investigating Crises*, 148.

¹⁰⁰ Krepon and Cohn, ed., *Crises in South Asia*, 35.

¹⁰¹ Lalwani and Haegeland, *Investigating Crises*, 80.

¹⁰² Nayak and Krepon, *The Unfinished Crisis*, 21; Nayak and Krepon, *US Crisis Management in South Asia's Twin Peaks Crisis*, 39; Krepon and Cohn, ed., *Crises in South Asia*, 34.

¹⁰³ Nayak and Krepon, *US Crisis Management in South Asia's Twin Peaks Crisis*, 39.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 39; Krepon and Cohn, ed., *Crises in South Asia*, 35, 50.

impact mechanisms. Information mechanisms at this level can include supporting investigations into the triggering event, as when the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) assisted the Mumbai attack investigation,¹⁰⁵ or verifying pledges made by either side, for example by providing and maintaining a sensor network to monitor for future cross-border infiltrations.¹⁰⁶ Information mechanisms can also facilitate India-Pakistan communication and mutual understanding of risk, as when Senator John McCain conveyed to Pakistan the enormous pressures on Indian leaders post-Mumbai, prompting Pakistan to take (limited) action against those responsible as a conciliatory move.¹⁰⁷ Incentive mechanisms, such as calling publicly for de-escalation, coordinating with key third parties to privately message lack of support for further military action, and threatening to suspend or offering to strengthen limited trade, diplomatic and military ties, can put both sides on notice and disincentivize escalation.¹⁰⁸ Third parties can implement low-end intervention mechanisms such as elevating travel advisories and putting diplomatic missions in the region on authorized departure status in order to signal the seriousness of the situation to both sides and draw attention to potential economic losses from further conflict.¹⁰⁹

The most effective *deliverables during low-intensity conflict* entail non-military responses, creating pauses in the crisis and facilitating face-saving exits. Third parties can call on Pakistan to condemn the triggering event, pledge to investigate it, and take legal action against those responsible.¹¹⁰ Establishing a Joint Investigative Team (JIT) could be one option, though Indian authorities are likely to resist such efforts as Pakistan did not participate in good faith in the JIT post-Pathankot. Assurances and external-actor verification could help mitigate these concerns if non-action were tied to negative consequences, including naming those responsible and potential sanctions. Third parties can call on India for deliverables including refraining from retaliatory military action or horizontal escalation and responding through the courts¹¹¹ or, if military action is inevitable, remaining below certain thresholds.¹¹² While such appeals might fall of deaf ears, they have contained conflicts in the past (including in the Kargil crisis)¹¹³ and serve to signal the disapproval of the international community to retributive action. Crisis managers can likewise ask both sides' leaders to make speeches and other symbolic gestures designed to facilitate de-

¹⁰⁵ Lalwani and Haegeland, *Investigating Crises*, 261; Krepon and Cohn, ed., *Crises in South Asia*, 25; Nayak and Krepon, *The Unfinished Crisis*, 15.

¹⁰⁶ While India rejected a similar offer made during the Twin Peaks crisis over surveillance concerns, the U.S.-India relationship has potentially progressed to the point that New Delhi might consider such a plan. See Nayak and Krepon, *US Crisis Management in South Asia's Twin Peaks Crisis*, 27.

¹⁰⁷ Nayak and Krepon, *The Unfinished Crisis*, 42.

¹⁰⁸ Lalwani and Haegeland, *Investigating Crises*, 179. Krepon and Cohn, ed., *Crises in South Asia*, 21.

¹⁰⁹ Such action, reminiscent of the U.S. Ambassador to India's decision to reduce Embassy staffing during the Twin Peaks crisis, highlights the economic cost of escalation to the business community. Nayak and Krepon, *US Crisis Management in South Asia's Twin Peaks Crisis*, 36; Krepon and Cohn, ed., *Crises in South Asia*, 49; While these are both useful tools for signaling, crisis managers should also recognize the risk that sending an alarmist message could accelerate the conflict by incentivizing preemptive action. Mumbai 29.

¹¹⁰ Pressure from China on Pakistan to hold the militants responsible contributed to Pakistan's decision to arrest a number of militants in the wake of the Mumbai attack. Interview with former U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan, September 10, 2019; Nayak and Krepon, *The Unfinished Crisis*, 43, 46.

¹¹¹ India could, for example, establish a task force to develop recommendations for its options to bring a case against Pakistan under international law.

¹¹² This approach would represent a shift from the U.S. response following the Pulwama attack, in which Washington reportedly signaled to Delhi its acceptance of India's right to self-defense, and a return to previous crisis response strategies.

¹¹³ Lalwani and Haegeland, *Investigating Crises*, 79.

escalation and face-saving off-ramps, with the implicit or explicit understanding that the failure to take such actions could also result in negative consequences (or, conversely, that positive actions could be rewarded with economic or political incentives).¹¹⁴ Such actions have the added benefit of providing time for leaders to step back and assess the crisis, slowing momentum and creating opportunities for pauses in escalation to allow for pledged actions to take effect.¹¹⁵

At the level of a *medium-intensity conflict*, the *mechanisms* most useful to the United States and other third-party crisis managers convey a greater level of attention and concern and require greater commitment from the parties involved. Information mechanisms at this level include those discussed previously as well as intelligence and assessments intended to shape understandings of risk and mutual calculations. This can include sharing the results of escalation war games and nuclear effects and casualty estimates or clarifying concerns about adversary actions through dialogue with both sides.¹¹⁶ Incentive mechanisms are especially useful at this point in the conflict though they should be used carefully. With regards to Pakistan, crisis managers can specifically threaten to withdraw support for Pakistan's International Monetary Fund (IMF) program, push for its blacklisting by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), revoke Pakistan's status as a Major Non-NATO Ally, or designate it as a state sponsor of terrorism. Positive incentives include the potential reinstatement of some civilian or military assistance and International Military Education and Training (IMET) activities.¹¹⁷ Regarding India, crisis managers can threaten to prevent its potential inclusion in the UNSC or the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), suspend or terminate military and intelligence-sharing agreements, and revoke its Major Defense Partner designation. Such actions would compromise ongoing U.S. efforts to build a robust partnership with India in the Indo-Pacific, but if the risk of controlled or uncontrolled escalation were such that if nuclear war appeared possible, the strategic importance of the relationship should not limit the mechanisms and leverage available to crisis managers. Positive incentives include a renewed pledge of support for India's inclusion in a reformed UNSC or for its membership in the NSG, reinstatement of India's Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) status, and technology transfer concessions.

Intervention mechanisms include direct calls and visits from high-level officials from the U.S. and other third-party governments, depending on the security situation. In addition to facilitating frank discussions, such visits compel both sides to temporarily refrain from further escalation in order to avoid jeopardizing the safety of a key foreign official.¹¹⁸ This can be paired with public statements from third-party governments, religious figures, and representatives of the business community emphasizing the seriousness of the situation and calling on both sides to refrain from further action. Given its significant investment under CPEC, such statements from Chinese officials would be especially significant to Pakistani leaders not accustomed to such public censure.¹¹⁹ The United States should also convene the UNSC to receive regular briefings on the

¹¹⁴ Michael Krepon and Julia Thompson, ed., *Deterrence Stability and Escalation Control in South Asia* (Washington, DC: The Henry L. Stimson Center, 2013), 188.

¹¹⁵ Nayak and Krepon, *US Crisis Management in South Asia's Twin Peaks Crisis*, 27.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 35; Lalwani and Haegeland, *Investigating Crises*, 261.

¹¹⁷ Such incentives must be weighed carefully in order to avoid unnecessarily incentivizing bad behavior such that a moral hazard is created.

¹¹⁸ Lalwani and Haegeland, *Investigating Crises*, 260. Nayak and Krepon, *The Unfinished Crisis*, 35, 58.

¹¹⁹ China has disincentivized escalation previously by privately declining Pakistan's request for support during the Kargil and Twin Peaks crisis and issuing a rare public statement of caution in 1996. Krepon and Cohn, ed., *Crises in*

situation and issue related press statements, presidential statements, and potentially resolutions under Chapter 6¹²⁰ or even Chapter 7¹²¹ authorities. The UN observer mission in Kashmir could be strengthened to allow additional oversight of the situation and bring further political pressure to bear on both sides to de-escalate.¹²² The UN Secretary General could also become directly involved as an influential, impartial international figure negotiating with both sides.¹²³ Third parties could also put diplomatic missions under ordered departure status, raise the level of regional travel warnings, and issue a travel warning for neighboring countries that could be impacted by the effects of a potential nuclear war, including China (to the extent that such an action could induce and would not jeopardize cooperation from Beijing).¹²⁴

Most *deliverables appropriate for medium intensity conflict* will center on preventing the war from escalating further. Depending on the escalation scenario in question, these deliverables will be most effective when they anticipate the likely next move and seek private pledges from both sides to avoid crossing one another's red lines. They can also focus on reducing opportunities for uncontrolled escalation by asking one or both sides to limit readiness and deployment of weapon systems most vulnerable to this risk, including tactical nuclear weapons. India and Pakistan may not agree to these deliverables, but the "asks" themselves represent important signaling by the international community. Deliverables can also include prisoner exchanges, provision of humanitarian assistance, or civilian evacuations that both bring fighting to a temporary pause and draw the attention of both sides to the conflict's toll. Especially meaningful would be a private pledge from one or both sides to avoid additional escalation. This would facilitate a gradual diminution of the conflict as supplies and ammunition stocks are depleted and would allow both sides to save face by appearing as though they are keeping up the fight. Once established, the plateau in action would allow facilitate further deliverables, including evergreen options such as backchannel talks, positive public statements, and symbolic gestures. Both sides could also shift their domestic messaging to highlight the "victory" they achieved in battle to make rhetorical space for an honorable cessation of hostilities. Such an agreement would also allow India to return its focus to demanding accountability for the triggering event. If it were to have shown restraint in conflict, India could have the international backing of crisis managers in doing so.

Mechanisms appropriate for high-intensity conflict are likely to be hugely disruptive to the region and to the broader international system and should only be employed in cases in which escalation to nuclear war appears highly likely. As an informational mechanism at this stage, the U.S. could conduct a messaging campaign targeting U.S. citizens in both countries (that would also be viewable by the broader populations) about the risks of nuclear exposure and likely impact of a nuclear exchange. This strategy would include the distribution of potassium iodide tablets to U.S. citizens, although such an effort would require complex logistical

South Asia, 21; Nayak and Krepon, *The Unfinished Crisis*, 179. Nayak and Krepon, *US Crisis Management in South Asia's Twin Peaks Crisis*, 172, 211.

¹²⁰ Interview with former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for International Security, U.S. Department of State, November 14, 2019.

¹²¹ Interview with former U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan, September 10, 2019.

¹²² Interview with Program Director, DC think tank, September 13, 2019.

¹²³ Interview with Former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for International Security, U.S. Department of State, November 14, 2019.

¹²⁴ Nayak and Krepon, *US Crisis Management in South Asia's Twin Peaks Crisis*, 36.

arrangements.¹²⁵ In addition to offering some protection to U.S. citizens, the campaign would seek to generate demand from local populations to end the conflict, thus potentially counteracting the expected domestic audience pressures for escalation on both sides.¹²⁶ Third parties could also intensify outreach through their diaspora communities to raise public calls for restraint on both sides.

Key incentive mechanisms include threats or action to restrict one or both countries' access to the international SWIFT financial system or to dollar clearing services, or to publicly announce end-use violations to constrain future defense acquisitions.¹²⁷ Regarding Pakistan, the U.S. could follow through on the threats to declare it a state sponsor of terrorism and to withdraw Pakistan's designation as a Major Non-NATO Ally, China could threaten to curtail financial support and investment under CPEC, and the Gulf states could similarly withdraw promised economic assistance. U.S. crisis managers have a wider range of incentives to direct towards India, including withdrawing its status as a Major Defense Partner and suspending or ending U.S.-India Civil Nuclear Agreement. The U.S. could also push to revoke India's selection as host of the 2022 G20 summit, a hugely anticipated and symbolic event in India's 75th anniversary year. In addition, the U.S. could move to cut off India's access to U.S. military sales, end planned military and diplomatic engagements, and suspend or end technology- and information-sharing agreements. Positive incentive mechanisms also remain, though they should be used with caution given the risk of incentivizing future brinkmanship. These can include private or public commitments to resolve the Kashmir dispute or formally recognize one side's position, visits to the White House or a neutral venue for negotiations, or significant trade-related concessions. Specific to India, the U.S. could more closely involve India in settlement negotiations and reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan. Regarding Pakistan, U.S. crisis managers could volunteer to reinstitute civilian and security assistance and to work towards Pakistan's membership in the NSG.

An expanded portfolio of intervention mechanisms is appropriate to consider at this stage of extreme risk. The U.S. could take direct kinetic action against any leaders of the Pakistan-based militant group responsible for the triggering event who was not already targeted, though such a strike could prove highly disruptive in an already volatile situation. Third parties can also enact sanctions against key officials and groups, restrict the entry of both countries' nationals into the U.S. in the event of a nuclear exchange, fully draw down diplomatic missions, and raise travel warnings to the highest level. To signal the seriousness of U.S. concern, Washington can sail assets from the 5th Fleet into the North Arabian Sea ostensibly to protect and assure merchant shipping. These assets could threaten to interdict certain levels of conflict through denial techniques such as disabling conventional systems with cyber operations, disrupting signals with electronic warfare assets, or intercepting missiles with Aegis-enabled guided missile destroyers. In exchange for one party committing to a more limited strike or less ambitious target, a third party might also provide valuable material or informational support to help that party succeed

¹²⁵ Such a campaign would no doubt be complicated by Pakistani and Indian airspace closures and internet and television blackouts but should be considered should technologies exist to penetrate such defenses.

¹²⁶ Christopher Clary, Sameer Lalwani, and Niloufer Siddiqui, "Public Opinion and Crisis Behavior in a Nuclearized South Asia" (unpublished manuscript, Washington, DC, 2019).

¹²⁷ The consequences of invoking such weaponized interdependence could be severe, including international hostility and further decoupling efforts and should only be risked in order to stave off nuclear war. See Henry Farrell and Abraham Newman, "Weaponized Interdependence: How Global Economic Networks Shape State Coercion," *International Security* 44, No. 1 (2019), pp. 42-79, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00351.

operationally or offer the promise of such support in the future should further escalation be avoided.¹²⁸

At the level of *high-intensity conflict*, *deliverables* will be driven by the specifics of the escalation scenario in question. In their most basic form, they will be for one or both sides to step back from the brink and pledge to avoid further escalation, and for leaders to take steps to lower the risk of inadvertent or accidental escalation. Once such steps are taken, evergreen deliverables including operational pauses and public statements can facilitate face-saving de-escalation.

IV. Conclusion

All conflict scenarios between India and Pakistan, regardless of likelihood, contain plausible pathways to escalation. In this study, we first identified some of the mechanisms and facets of escalation by examining five scenarios for conflict between India and Pakistan. Then, we considered pathways to de-escalation. We assessed plausible avenues for crisis management and de-escalation including leverage points, incentive structures, mechanisms, and deliverables. While third-party involvement is not sufficient for de-escalation between India and Pakistan, third parties can manage crises by employing the strategies discussed here to prevent, mitigate, and de-escalate conflict. By examining the wide range of potential conflict and de-escalation scenarios, all parties can approach fraught situations with a fuller understanding of the impact of their actions and the potential pathways they can take toward peace. While that choice ultimately rests with the leaders of India and Pakistan, the consequences of any nuclear use on the Subcontinent would be all of ours to bear.

¹²⁸ Three points undergird this suggestion of operational support: 1) A former US official told us that under certain political contexts, the US might be inclined to help with intelligence and targeting, in part to shore up their trust. 2) It is plausible that given the depth of military to military relationships, China might provide guidance to Pakistan or Russia to India to shore their trust. 3) Indians certainly believe this and may request it. On the afternoon of February 26th, one retired military official close to the Indian government suggested to one of us that the Balakot strike had in fact been supported by US military guidance on radar gaps and ingress routes through the LOC to evade Pakistani air defenses.

Appendices

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to acknowledge the contributions of a number of individuals and organizations without whom this analytic assessment would not have been possible. First, we are grateful to the entire Stimson Center South Asia team for their thoughtful research and technical assistance, capable administrative support, and consistent professionalism and good humor, all of which were instrumental in bringing this study to fruition. Likewise, we appreciate the contributions of our colleagues across the organization, including those in other regional and functional programs, in our finance and communications offices, and in the administrative team, who work tirelessly to facilitate our ongoing research.

We are also indebted to the dozens of outside analysts and practitioners who provided insights into these questions and helped to shape and challenge our thinking as we developed the arguments in this study. Both those who shared their expertise in formal interviews and many others who served as informal sounding boards provided invaluable guidance that sparked new ideas and sharpened our understanding of South Asian escalation and war termination scenarios. This includes the attendees of our three-day crisis dynamics conference, which, though not directly tied to this assessment, provided a valuable opportunity for discussion and debate on a set of deeply relevant issues.

Appendix A: Methodology

Section A – Summary of Approach

The content of this analysis was generated through a variety of inputs including a literature review of relevant works on escalation control, conflict dynamics, war termination, and crisis management in the region and more broadly; a series of semi-structured interviews with 23 current and former officials, analysts, and scholars; and a three-day conference on crisis dynamics in South Asia held in September 2019 with 25 mid- and senior-level Pakistani, Indian, British, Australian, and U.S. analysts as well as 10 U.S. government officials.

The literature review included works on crises in South Asia including Brasstacks, the Compound Crisis, Kargil, Twin Peaks, Mumbai, Pathankot, Uri, and Balakot, as well as analyses of several potential trigger events that did not ultimately result in a significant crisis or hostilities. This review was conducted in order to study how crisis dynamics have evolved over time, to chart the typical sequence of crisis escalation and conflict management efforts, and to identify a variety of mechanisms and deliverables that have proven effective in de-escalating previous crises and conflicts. Sources consulted also included South Asia-specific works on India and Pakistan's evolving nuclear doctrines and postures and the function of deterrence and escalation control in Southern Asia. We also consulted a range of more general analyses of the risk of inadvertent escalation, the role of third parties in conflict management, and pathways to war termination.

Interviews conducted for this study occurred between July-November 2019 and centered on many of those same topics in addition to inquiries specific to the escalation and de-escalation scenarios detailed in our analysis. Individuals consulted included a range of U.S., international, Indian, and Pakistani current and former officials, scholars, and analysts. See the attached list of interviewees (see section B) for additional details. Names are withheld, though general affiliations as well as dates are provided in order to place interview subjects in context. The attached question list (see section C) includes a number of standard questions that were asked to most interviewees, although additional questions were added as appropriate to tailor conversations to subjects' specific expertise.

The three-day conference on crisis dynamics in Southern Asia was hosted at the Stimson Center from September 17-19, 2019, and included a range of U.S., international, and regional analysts and practitioners. On the first day, attendees participated in an escalation simulation exercise designed to elicit individual and group predictions on how both India and Pakistan would respond in a series of action-reaction moves sparked by a terror event on the order of the 2008 Mumbai attack. These conversations informed the second day of the conference, which featured five panel discussions including a review of lessons learned (and unlearned) from the first two nuclear decades in South Asia, an assessment of the impact of modernization and nationalism on future crises, an exploration of potential escalation and de-escalation pathways, and an analysis of the changing roles of third-party crisis managers. While the conference was supported by outside funding and not directly tied to this project, it provided many valuable insights that have been incorporated into this paper. A detailed summary of the conference proceedings and discussions will be provided separately for reference.

Section B – List of Interviewees

1. Retired U.S. Intelligence Officer. Interviewed July 23, 2019.
2. Retired U.S. Army Officer. Interviewed July 23, 2019.
3. Former Official, Indian National Security Secretariat. Interviewed August 1, 2019.
4. US think-tank scholar. Interviewed August 1, 2019.
5. Retired Pakistan Army Officer. Interviewed August 2, 2019.
6. Retired U.S. Army Officer. Interviewed August 2, 2019.
7. Professor, U.S. University. Interviewed August 2, 2019.
8. Professor, UK University. Interviewed August 2, 2019.
9. Former U.S. Senior Defense & Intelligence official. Interviewed August 5, 2019.
10. Serving U.S. Official Interviewed August 20, 2019.
11. Retired Pakistan Air Force Officer. Interviewed August 26, 2019.
12. US think-tank scholar. Interviewed September 6, 2019.
13. Former U.S. Diplomat. Interviewed September 10, 2019.
14. US think-tank scholar. Interviewed September 13, 2019.
15. Former US Senior National Security Official. Interviewed September 17, 2019.
16. Senior Indian Journalist. Interviewed September 17, 2019.
17. Retired Indian Naval Officer. Interviewed September 17, 2019.
18. Professor, Pakistan University. Interviewed September 19, 2019.
19. Former U.S. Diplomat. Interviewed September 24, 2019.
20. Former U.S. Senior National Security Official. Interviewed October 23, 2019.
21. Retired Pakistan Army Officer. Interviewed October 24, 2019.
22. Former U.S. Senior State Department Official. Interviewed November 14, 2019.
23. Professor, U.S. University, November 14, 2019.

Section C – List of General Interview Questions

Conversation Topics (implicit or explicitly communicated before interview)

- Avenues for crisis management, escalation control, and conflict termination after a full-scale conventional war has begun between India and Pakistan
- Key stakeholders for those avenues (primary parties, third parties, multilateral groupings)

Setting the Scene: Parameters and Conditions of the Conflict

- **ONSET:** Classical onset narrative of a terror attack in India that the GOI treats confidently as having official linkage to Pakistan’s security establishment/holds GOP culpable. Other potential triggers also open to consideration.
- **TIME:**
 - 2021-2024 ceteris paribus, excepting any reasonable developments 2-5 years from present day.
- **INDIAN MOVE:** Some version of a strategy like Cold Start deployed by India resulting in capture of some Pakistani territory, an Indian naval blockade of Karachi, and/or other escalation pathways that could ultimately initiate a full-scale conventional conflict.

- NUCLEAR TINGE:
 - No detonations of nuclear weapons yet, though signaling is possible.

Questions (“Given the outlined conditions of the war scenario, ...”)

Victory for Each Aggressor

1. What is the Indian theory of victory (e.g. punishment; international engagement; holding territory ransom; deterring unacceptable counteroffensive response from Pakistan)?
2. What would a Pakistani theory of victory look like post Indian operation (e.g. reclaiming territory; punishment; international engagement; deterring unacceptable third move from India)?

Conflict Cessation Short of Victory

3. Short of victory, what are each aggressor’s core operational and strategic interests?
4. Short of victory, what are each aggressor’s minimally acceptable conditions of conflict cessation? (OR: If victory is untenable, when and what does an acceptable stopping point look like for each aggressor?)
5. What might bilateral de-escalation look like (mechanisms, sequence)?

Impact of Domestic Environment

6. Could domestic publics and political elite audiences play an enabling or limiting (commitment trap) role for decision makers in escalation and/or cessation of this conflict? (If so, when and how?)
7. Could security and military audiences play an enabling or limiting role for decision makers in escalation and/or cessation of this conflict? (e.g. What’s the effect on morale/political will of large numbers of casualties in the first few days of conflict?)

Impact of Nuclearized Environment?

8. What might nuclear signaling in this scenario look like for each aggressor prior to (perhaps in pursuit of) war termination (including victory or a stopping point short of victory)?
9. How might dual-use delivery systems impact escalation?
10. Would India/Pakistan go after C3 and when?

The Role of 3rd Parties

11. What, if any, role could/would key 3rd parties play in crisis management, escalation control, and war termination?
12. What are the key 3rd parties?
13. Questions for Listed 3rd Party in Regard to One/Both Aggressors:

- a. What are the 3rd parties' stakes/interests in stability on the subcontinent (e.g. economic, geopolitical, security, political, environmental)?
 - b. What leverage, if any, for crisis management/off ramps/de-escalation do those 3rd parties have?
 - c. What leverage, if any, for escalation to support one aggressor's pursuit of victory (escalate to de-escalate) does each of those 3rd parties have?
 - d. What are the major 3rd party mechanisms for influence/coercion (soft: diplomatic, political, economic; hard: military information, supplies, tactical support):
 - o to escalate to deescalate (aiding in a victory for their chosen aggressor)?
 - o and/or for crisis management/facilitating an off ramp/de-escalation?
14. At what stages/Are there windows during the conflict when 3rd party interventions are more likely to be permitted, requested, and/or effective?
15. What might actual de-escalation involving 3rd parties look like (actors+mechanisms+sequence)? (OR: Given your answers, describe some ways this might play out.)

Key Exogenous Factors

16. What key (new) technologies and corresponding capabilities could have stabilizing/destabilizing impacts?
17. What developments in key global tension spots could impact the nature of war termination and how? (e.g. Afghanistan, Iran and Middle East, Korean peninsula)

Final Discussion

18. Are there any aspects we should consider of a future India-Pakistan war that could be significantly different from past conflicts and crises that you haven't mentioned already?
19. Generally, are there key questions or factors we are failing to consider?
20. Given the scenario we presented you with, what is the probability that India would allow third-party intervention short of victory as you defined it?
21. Given the scenario we presented you with, what is the probability that Pakistan would allow third-party intervention short of victory as you defined it?

Appendix B: Shape of Escalation Curves

Figure 1: Bell Curve
(Shape of Scenario 1–Line of Control Firing)

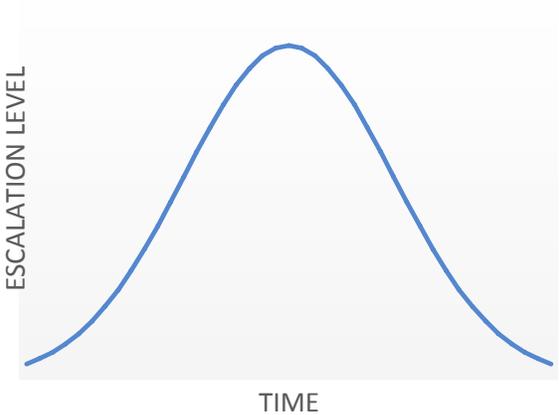


Figure 2: Stepwise Function
(Shape of Scenario 2–Reciprocal Air Strikes)

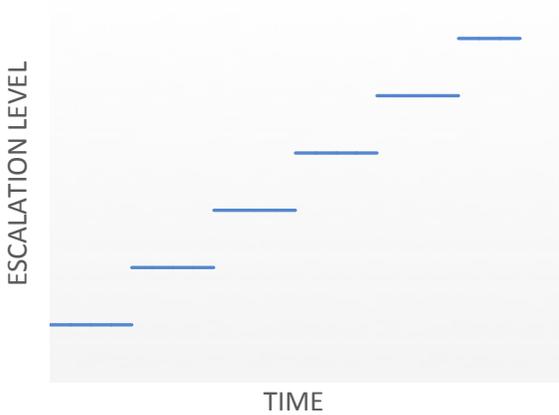


Figure 3: S Curve
(Shape of Scenario 3–Fait Accompli Operation
Potentially Scenario 4–Naval Blockade)

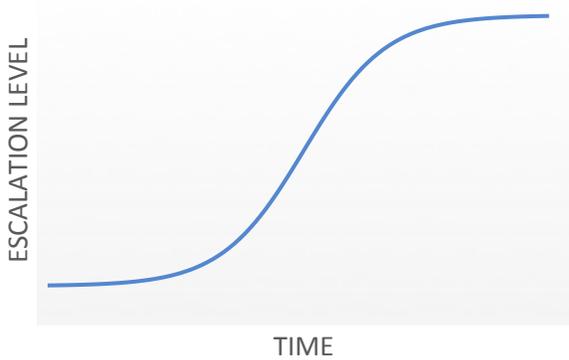


Figure 4: Diminishing Returns Curve
(Potentially shape of Scenario 4–Naval
Blockade)

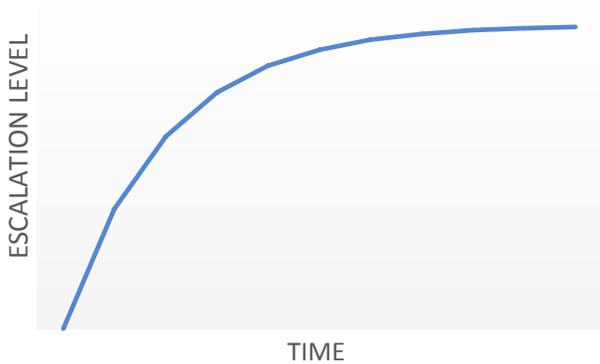
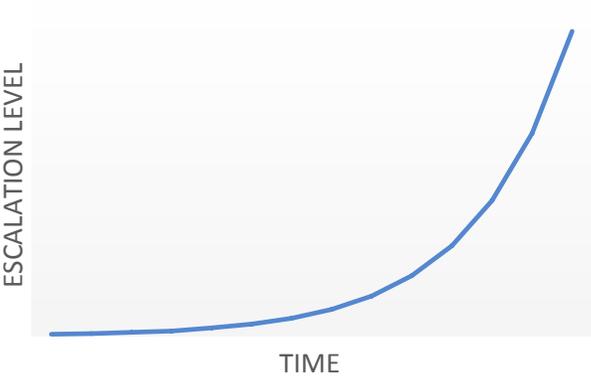


Figure 5: Exponential Curve
(Shape of Scenario 5–Cold Start)



Appendix C: Alternative Views of Escalation Ladders

Table 3: Indian Escalation Ladder Facing Pakistan

(from Rodney Jones, "Nuclear Escalation Ladders in South Asia," Advanced Systems and Concepts Office, Defense Threat Reduction Agency, Report Number ASCO 2011 007, April 2011, p. 14)

Rung Order	Thresholds and Rungs	Peace	Military Crisis	Terrorist Attack	War in Progress
19	All out counter-value strike (response)		ongoing		>20
18	Strategic counter-military strike (response)			lost	>30
17	Proportional retaliation (response) vs. TNW			in	>95
16	Demonstrative nuclear weapon use (response)			the	<50
	No Nuclear Use Threshold			noise	
15	Conventional air campaign vs bases and airfields			<30	>50
14	Initiate major war to cripple Pakistani forces			<15	<40
13	Full nuclear alert (wpns assembly and transfer)			10	>80
12	Complete full mobilization, all services			<30	100
	No Major Conventional War Threshold				
11	Initiate full range of 'shallow' Cold Start options		ongoing	>25	>75
10	Implement limited subset of Cold Start options		<5	>50	>90
9	Precautionary nuclear alert (no transfer)		<10	>10	>90
8	Ultimatum for Cold Start operations		>40	>50	>60
7	Initiate ground and air force mobilization		30	>30	100
	No Conventional War Threshold				
6	Subconventional (covert) offensive campaign in heart of Pakistan	<10	0	>30	
5	Subconventional (covert) offensive campaign in Kashmir	>30	<5	>60	
4	Subconventional (covert) retaliation	<20	<5	>50	
	No "Hot" Warfare Threshold				
3	Selective areas of military mobilization	<5	>60	<5	
2	Military signalling (tests, exercises)	<20	>35	0	
1	Pre-crisis maneuvering, gestures, diplomacy	12	>75	>25	
	Disagreement - Pol-Mil Rivalry				

Table 4: Pakistan Escalation Ladder Facing India

(from Rodney Jones, “Nuclear Escalation Ladders in South Asia,” Advanced Systems and Concepts Office, Defense Threat Reduction Agency, Report Number ASCO 2011 007, April 2011, p. 17)

Rung Order	Response or Initiative Thresholds and Rungs	Context and Probability Estimate			
		Peace	Military Crisis	Terrorist Attack	War in Progress
18	All out counter-value strike		ongoing		>20
17	Strategic counter-military strike		↑		>30
16	TNW employment vs. Indian ground forces				>95
15	Nuclear limited action vs. naval blockade			lost	>30
14	Covert nuclear employment at sea			in	>50
13	Demonstrative nuclear weapon use				>75
No Nuclear Use Threshold					
12	Selective counter-military air strikes			the noise	>50
11	Full nuclear alert (wpns assembly and transfer)				>80
10	Complete full mobilization, all services				100
No Major Conventional War Threshold					
9	Blocking, limited escalation vs. Cold Start		ongoing		
8	Precautionary nuclear alert (no transfer)		>40	>50	>90
7	Prepositioning to counter Cold Start options		>60	>10	>90
6	Initiate ground and air force mobilization		>95	>50	100
No Conventional War Threshold					
5	Subconventional (covert) offensive campaign in heart of India	<10	0	>30	
4	Resumption of (covert) offensive campaign in Kashmir	>10	>50	>60	
No "Hot" Warfare Threshold					
3	Selective areas of military mobilization	15	>60	>35	
2	Military signalling (tests, exercises)	25	>50	0	
1	Pre-crisis maneuvering, gestures, diplomacy	>50	>75	15	
Disagreement - Pol-Mil Rivalry					

Table 5: India Pakistan Crisis Intensity Indicators

(from Michael Krepon and Liv Dowling, “Crisis Intensity and Nuclear Signaling in South Asia,” *Investigating Crises: South Asia’s Lessons, Evolving Dynamics, and Trajectories*, Ed. Sameer Lalwani and Hannah Haegeland, Washington, DC: Stimson Center, 2018, p. 209)

		CRISES				
	Indicator	Brasstacks (1986-87)	Compound (1990)	Kargil (1999)	Twin Peaks (2001-2)	Mumbai (2008)
Extreme intensity	Limited warfare			X		
	Missiles, warheads mated			X		
	Nuclear weapons or dual-use missiles deployed to field/ fighting corridors			X	X	
	Nuclear-capable aircraft moved to satellite bases/ positioned on runways		X	X	X	
	Preparing aircraft, frontline equipment for combat		X	X		
	Mobilization of offensive/ defensive units to fighting corridors with ammunition	X	X	X	X	X
	Cancellation of leaves	X		X	X	X
Severe intensity	Large-scale military exercises in sensitive areas	X	X			
	Movement of missiles out of garrisons and some nuclear-capable aircraft to satellite bases			X	X	
	Movement of warships out of port				X	
	Rhetoric from national leadership suggesting heightened nuclear readiness	X	X	X	X	X
Moderate intensity	Small unit skirmishes along the Line of Control (LoC)			X		
	Publicizing LoC raids and accompanying national media campaigns					
	Intensified small arms, rocket, and artillery fire across LoC			X		
	Increased tempo/boldness of Pakistan-supported anti-India militant groups				X	X
	Missile flight tests				X	

Appendix D: Third-Party Crisis Response Efforts and Conflict Management Roles

U.S. Crisis Response

In the event of a crisis, the U.S. should leverage relationships to communicate early, coordinate internally amongst embassies and agencies as well as other governments, frame the crisis in terms of nuclear escalation risk, and involve the most senior U.S. security officials should escalation seem likely or imminent.

The best chance of preventing escalation to nuclear war is to arrest a conflict before it begins. In the immediate aftermath of a triggering event, the first responders from the United States should be the Ambassador and Country Team members posted to both India and Pakistan. These individuals will have both close knowledge of the details and the likely impact of the triggering event and, crucially, personal relationships with key interlocutors in host country governments.¹²⁹ Once a potential triggering event occurs, these individuals should quickly establish communications with their interlocutors to both gather information about the event and initial reactions and strongly urge both sides to avoid a militarized response.

Specifically, the Ambassador and his or her colleagues in Pakistan—including the Chief of the Office of Defense Representative Pakistan (ODRP) and the Defense Attaché—should privately urge their Pakistani counterparts to quickly and publicly condemn the attack and pledge to cooperate with Indian authorities in any subsequent investigation. In addition to civilian, military, and intelligence leadership, special attention should be paid to engagement with both Directors General for Military Operations (DGMOs) given the centrality of the DGMO hotline in crisis communications. While far from certain of success, these appeals have the potential to defuse a possible crisis before it escalates into a conflict, particularly if attribution of the triggering event is murky. According to one high-level diplomatic official, this was the case in at least one would-be crisis in the last ten years when the United States successfully appealed to the Pakistanis to issue a public condemnation of a cross-LoC attack carried out by LeT.¹³⁰ Based, in part, on this public statement, the Indians refrained from taking military action in response.¹³¹

The effectiveness of these direct conversations will depend on the strength of the relationships with host country counterparts maintained by Country Team members and on the degree to which interagency leadership in Washington empowers their representatives on the ground to lead initial response efforts. If several key officials have recently arrived at the Embassy and/or have failed to develop strong relationships with influential interlocutors, such efforts are likely to be significantly less effective. In all diplomacy, especially in the South Asian context, personal relationships should not be discounted as valuable avenues for preventing escalation before it

¹²⁹ In the Twin Peaks crisis, one staffer at Embassy Islamabad remarked, “Warning lights flashed at US Embassy New Delhi... though not on the 6th and 7th floors of State Department [where the Assistant Secretary for South Asia and the leadership of the State Department, respectively, reside].” See Polly Nayak and Michael Krepon, *US Crisis Management in South Asia’s Twin Peaks Crisis* (Washington, DC: The Henry L. Stimson Center, 2006), 22.

¹³⁰ Interview with former U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan, September 10, 2019.

¹³¹ The efficacy of public condemnations or offers of joint investigations are likely to be limited to relatively minor triggering events after which the Indian government faces a decision of whether to select-into a crisis. In cases in which the trigger is of a larger scale or more significant, public condemnation is likely to be dismissed. This was the case during the 2001-2002 Twin Peaks crisis when Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf’s public condemnation of the attack on India’s Parliament building was “brushed off” by Indian officials. (See p.17 https://www.stimson.org/sites/default/files/file-attachments/Twin_Peaks_Crisis.pdf)

begins.¹³² Accordingly, high-level officials in Washington should recognize the value of these direct ties and rely on their representatives in-country to lead initial engagement efforts via frank, private conversations. Past crises have seen such direct outreach compromised by instructions from Washington that were confused or slow to arrive, losing valuable time immediately after a triggering event takes place. This ground-level action can also supplement and compensate for the limited attention span of policymakers in Washington who only have the bandwidth to “do one problem at a time.”¹³³

Such direct appeals are more likely to find traction with Pakistani officials than with their Indian counterparts, despite the perceived U.S. tilt towards India, as Pakistan typically allows greater access to U.S. officials. Pakistan is also more likely to be in the situation of appealing to the international community to prevent Indian action following a triggering event attributed to groups operating from within Pakistani borders. India is more likely to take an arm’s-length approach to such appeals, but direct outreach to interlocutors in New Delhi is nonetheless valuable in order to signal that Washington is deeply concerned about the developments and to obtain a sense of the mood and likely actions in response.

Country Team members should likewise establish direct communication channels between Embassy Delhi and Embassy Islamabad to share information and coordinate response actions. This close coordination proved a key avenue for crisis management efforts following previous triggering events and helped to partially mitigate the challenges of working across U.S. government interagency lines and with interfacing between two different combatant commands, CENTCOM and INDOPACOM. These direct links between Embassies are likewise helpful for managing messaging to both civilian and military host country authorities, which has long been a challenge given the lack of parallel decision-making structures in civilian-led India and military-dominated Pakistan. Finally, direct communications between Embassies allow for the more rapid flow of information and decisions that would otherwise be centrally managed and coordinated from the State Department in Washington. While both sides should maintain close communications with the South and Central Asia (SCA) bureau, the quickening pace of crises in the Subcontinent demands a nimbler approach that can best be run, in the early stages, by Ambassadors on the ground.

Immediately after a potential triggering event occurs, diplomats and military representatives in both India and Pakistan should likewise convene meetings of officials from key third countries with an interest in managing crises. These should include, to the extent possible, representatives from China, Russia, the Gulf States, the EU, and the UK. While difficult to manage on an ad hoc basis, particularly if broader geopolitical tensions remain acute, every party has an interest in managing and de-escalating a potential South Asian crisis. These informal fora provide a venue for information sharing and coordination among key states. Even if the U.S. is likely to remain the party most actively engaged in crisis management, efforts to contain escalation will be significantly more effective if they are perceived by India and Pakistan as representing a broader,

¹³² Polly Nayak and Michael Krepon, *US Crisis Management in South Asia’s Twin Peaks Crisis* (Washington, DC: The Henry L. Stimson Center, 2006), p. 42, https://www.stimson.org/sites/default/files/file-attachments/Twin_Peaks_Crisis.pdf.

¹³³ Particularly if a crisis trigger occurs as other pressing foreign policy challenges are occupying policymakers in Washington, it can be difficult to rally needed attention. This was the case during the Twin Peaks crisis when the focus in Washington and Islamabad was on operations in Afghanistan and during Pulwama/Balakot, when the Hanoi summit was taking place. See Nayak and Krepon, *US Crisis Management in South Asia’s Twin Peaks Crisis*, p. 20.

unified push. Such groups should endeavor to coordinate their messaging in private conversations and public statements in order to demonstrate a unified approach to crisis management.

The Ambassador and other Country Team members should likewise coordinate internally within the Embassy to clearly frame crisis-related communications back to their respective headquarters in Washington as a nuclear threat rather than a counterterrorism issue. After the first decade of overt nuclearization on the Subcontinent (post-2008), U.S. policymakers increasingly focused on South Asian crises as counter terrorism issues rather than potential triggers for escalation to nuclear use. This counter-terrorism framing makes it more difficult to quickly rally the kind of sustained, high-level attention that potential India-Pakistan conflict demands due to its nuclear dimension and can result in the loss of valuable time for diplomatic outreach. By highlighting the acute nuclear threat that such crises represent, officials on the ground can more effectively convey the seriousness of the situation and make the case for early high-level attention.

Should the crisis escalate or appear likely to escalate to overt conflict between India and Pakistan, the locus of engagement should quickly ascend to the leadership level in Washington, to include the Secretary of State, Director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, National Security Advisor, and the President. Direct, private outreach by those at the highest levels of government sends powerful signals of the seriousness with which the U.S. views the threat of conflict and could help arrest a dispute before it escalates. The details of such calls will be contingent on the political, economic, and security environments of the day but should include a mix of carrots and sticks to reward restraint and deter further aggression. In past crises, high-level officials have happened to be traveling in the region during or in the immediate aftermath of an attack. This has proved especially effective in working the issue and encouraging more measured responses to prevail.

International Third-Party Crisis Managers

Third-Party Bilateral Actors

As mentioned above and especially in the context of growing limitations on the United States' impact as a crisis manager, there is a need for other third parties to supplement these efforts. Both bilateral and multilateral efforts can contribute to de-escalation pathways and will be considered in turn below. The United States will remain the key crisis manager in South Asia for the foreseeable future, but constraints on its contributions are growing. One key factor in this evolution is the impact of the Indo-Pacific strategy and U.S. efforts to compete with and balance China via a close partnership with India. U.S. crisis managers will face a difficult choice of how to manage this long-term partnership with India with the urgent and immediate demands of de-escalation in a potential nuclear crisis.¹³⁴ Likewise U.S. relations with Pakistan are likely to undergo continuing changes over the next five years and will largely depend on the outcomes of the conflict in Afghanistan. Should a stable settlement be achieved and U.S. forces withdraw, the United States would be less dependent on Pakistan for access to GLOCs and influence with the Taliban. Should the current situation continue or deteriorate into full-scale civil conflict, however, Pakistan would retain leverage to the extent that it is able to influence developments in Afghanistan. Likewise, the outcome of the 2020 presidential election will be important to the extent that a new administration might re-orient policy in South Asia.

¹³⁴ Interview with Nonresident Fellow, DC think tank, October 23, 2019.

China’s role in South Asian crisis management has traditionally been one of “backstopping” U.S. efforts while urging restraint.¹³⁵ As noted above, Beijing might soon find itself more invested in regional peace and security in order to protect its CPEC investments and personnel, and to safeguard its broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) assets and presence in the Indian Ocean. While China has traditionally been willing to tolerate civilian casualties overseas, the symbolic importance of CPEC and the strategic importance of its maritime presence could lead it to take a more active seat at the table in future crisis management endeavors. Conflict in South Asia could rise to the level of an immediate threat to China’s leaders if Beijing were to calculate that the conflict had the potential to spill over into Chinese territory, whether by stoking unrest in Xinjiang or Tibet or through fall-out from a possible nuclear detonation. One way China could support de-escalation efforts would be to restrict access by Pakistan to its Beidou satellite navigation system and other military surveillance and intelligence sharing platforms.¹³⁶

Another key variable that will shape China’s role in regional crises over the next five years will be the development of the Sino-Indian ties, particularly in the context of growing great-power competition and given lingering irritants in the relationship. Were, for example, the Dalai Lama to pass away in the near future and a dispute over his successor to develop or were a Doklam-style border dispute to flare up, this could complicate China’s potential role as a more active crisis manager. The result could be a future in which crises are seen as being negotiated between India and its advocate, the United States, and Pakistan and its advocate, China. This dynamic is likely to be destabilizing and should be avoided through regular U.S.-China dialogue on managing crises in South Asia.

Russia’s role in South Asian crises has been limited to date and has traditionally mirrored China’s in supporting U.S.-led crisis management efforts. Moscow maintains strong links with New Delhi based on decades of arms sales, military cooperation, and trade ties, although it is also beginning to establish stronger links with Pakistan that could increase its leverage across the subcontinent in future crises.¹³⁷ An additional variable is the extent to which the informal alliance between China and Russia might create pressure on Moscow to follow Beijing’s lead in backing Pakistan (or at least refrain from providing support to India) in a future dispute. More likely, though, is that Russia will remain merely a supporting actor in South Asian crisis management that is likely to lend verbal support to negotiation efforts without becoming actively involved. One key role Russia could play would be to signal to India and (if applicable in the future) Pakistan that it will not offer spare parts and service for Russian-origin military equipment in the event of an ongoing crisis. While this restriction would be unlikely to have an immediate impact on warfighting capabilities, it could begin to bite were conflict to continue beyond the range of 7-10 days and would, regardless, provide a powerful signal of support for de-escalation efforts. Likewise, were Russia to host a dialogue on de-escalation between India

¹³⁵ One caveat to this trend is the suggestion from a U.S. official that China played an “escalatory” role during the Balakot crisis. While we have been unable to verify this statement, it raises the possibility that Beijing might intentionally or unintentionally have fanned the flames during an already dangerous situation. If confirmed, this would be a concerning development given its significant influence in the region and especially in Pakistan.

¹³⁶ “Pakistan’s reliance on US GPS ends as China’s Beidou Navigation Satellite System has started to cover entire Pakistan.” *The Times of Islamabad*, February 13, 2018, <https://timesofislamabad.com/13-Feb-2018/pakistan-s-reliance-on-us-gps-ends-as-china-s-beidou-navigation-satellite-system-has-started-to-cover-entire-pakistan>.

¹³⁷ Kapoor, Nivedita. “Russia-Pakistan relations and its impact on India” *Observer Research Foundation*, July 3, 2019, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/russia-pakistan-relations-impact-india-52715/>.

and Pakistan, it could serve as a new and potentially acceptable host much as it has in ongoing negotiations with the Taliban in Afghanistan.¹³⁸

The Gulf States represent an additional block of countries with interests in and influence over both Pakistan and India. Given their alliance-like relationships with the U.S., they may also be easier to coordinate with on crisis management in the near- to medium-term as compared to China and Russia. While traditionally these links are stronger with Pakistan through its role as a Muslim state within the OIC and broader Ummah, both countries have substantial investment, trade (particularly energy), and remittance worker dependencies on Gulf states, which afford them substantial leverage and access. Looking ahead, there are indications that several Gulf states are expanding their trade links with India and could thus come to hold significant stakes in both countries. Indeed, while only by happenstance as he was on a previously scheduled visit to the region, Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohamed Bin Salman met with leaders in both India and Pakistan in the aftermath of the February Pulwama attack in an attempt to de-escalate tensions.¹³⁹ Even were regional ties with the Gulf States to grow, they are likely only to play a supporting role in future crisis management efforts and run the risk of internal tensions (for example between Saudi Arabi and Qatar) jeopardizing any attempts at unified messaging on de-escalation. One key role that Saudi Arabia, in particular, could play would be to publicly and privately establish contacts between key Islamic authorities and their counterparts in Pakistan to warn against the use of nuclear weapons under Islam in order to put pressure on Pakistan's leadership and create a face-saving off-ramp from nuclear use.¹⁴⁰ Likewise, were Gulf countries to restrict or curtail oil and gas supplies to both India and Pakistan during an active conflict, this could have a potentially significant effect on both energy import-dependent states.

The United Kingdom is another state with unique historical interests in and ties to both India and Pakistan and could play a key supporting role backing future U.S.-led crisis management efforts. Relationships between The UK Ministry of Defense and militaries in both India and Pakistan are particularly robust. Complicating its involvement, however, are ongoing Brexit negotiations and the potential domestic fall-out from its planned departure from the European Union. Should that process proceed smoothly, the UK could continue to play a useful supporting role in echoing U.S. messages. It should not be counted on for active involvement, however, if the Brexit process leads to significant domestic turmoil that distracts from London's interests and engagement abroad.

Third-Party Multilateral Actors

The United Nations represents a key multilateral organization with the potential to play an active role in South Asian crisis management. The UN is likely to be most useful as a device for signaling consensus among members of the Security Council on the need for de-escalation. This can be accomplished through a variety of mechanisms including holding an emergency

¹³⁸ Higgins, Andrew and Mujib Mashal. "In Moscow, Afghan Peace Talks Without the Afghan Government." *The New York Times*, February 4, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/04/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-russia-talks-russia.html>.

¹³⁹ Agence France-Presse. "Saudi vows to 'de-escalate' India-Pakistan tensions after Pulwama attack." *The Hindustan Times*, February 18, 2019, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/saudi-vows-to-de-escalate-india-pakistan-tensions-after-kashmir-attack/story-oR3I5PytoSCnSnxiWjlt3K.html>.

¹⁴⁰ Mowatt-Larssen, Rolf. "Islam and the Bomb: Religious Justification For and Against Nuclear Weapons." *The Harvard University's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs*, January 2011, https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/files/uploads/Islam_and_the_Bomb-Final.pdf.

meeting of the UNSC, public statements on up to, and potentially including, Security Council resolutions, regular briefings and convenings on the situation, the direct involvement of the UN Secretary General as a potential mediator, and a review of or increased investment in the UN observer group in Kashmir.¹⁴¹ If UN staff or observers were to be caught up in the fighting or at risk of conflict, the act of withdrawing staff could likewise send a powerful message. Also significant would be a UNSC push under Chapter 6 authority to enact sanctions on one or both parties to the conflict. Given the slow pace of such processes and the expected short duration of a potential war, however, such sanctions would be unlikely to take effect in time to impact the conflict directly. Their discussion and potential approval would nonetheless represent a powerful symbolic blow to both sides.

Other multilateral fora including the OIC, SCO, and SAARC are unlikely to play a significant role in de-escalation and crisis management strategies. These organizations have largely remained on the sidelines of such efforts in the past due to a variety of structural and capacity-based issues. According to Pakistan’s Foreign Ministry, the OIC has gone so far as to express “deep concern” following the conflict at Balakot, but no further action was taken towards de-escalation.¹⁴² While the SCO, in particular, could serve as an influential forum given the membership of both countries and the influence of China and Russia in the region, the organization has refrained from commenting on or involvement in past crises. That said, a statement of concern or a call for peaceful negotiation from the SCO, if forthcoming, could prove a useful signal of international interest in ending the conflict that could be helpful in creating a face-saving exit for one or both sides.¹⁴³ Finally, SAARC, despite being a representative organization including many of the smaller South Asian states that could be impacted in a potential nuclear exchange, has remained largely paralyzed by India-Pakistan tensions. The Nepali Foreign Minister released a statement calling for “utmost restraint” following the Balakot crisis, echoing the statements of other SAARC member states, but no official action was taken by the organization.¹⁴⁴ Given the extent to which SAARC’s functions have been curtailed by the standoff between the region’s two largest states, this dynamic is unlikely to change going forward.

¹⁴¹ Interview with Former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for International Security, U.S. Department of State, November 14, 2019.

¹⁴² “OIC calls for peaceful resolution of Kashmir issue, claims Pakistan.” *The Economic Times*, May 30, 2019. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/oic-calls-for-peaceful-resolution-of-kashmir-issue-claims-pakistan/articleshow/69582060.cms>.

¹⁴³ Haidari, M. Ashraf. “The SCO Can De-escalate India-Pakistan Tensions.” *The Diplomat*, March 01, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/03/the-sco-can-de-escalate-india-pakistan-tensions/>.

¹⁴⁴ Yhome K. “India-Pakistan tension: Is there a role for SAARC?” *Observer Research Foundation*, March 2, 2019, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/india-pakistan-tension-is-there-role-for-saarc-48690/>.